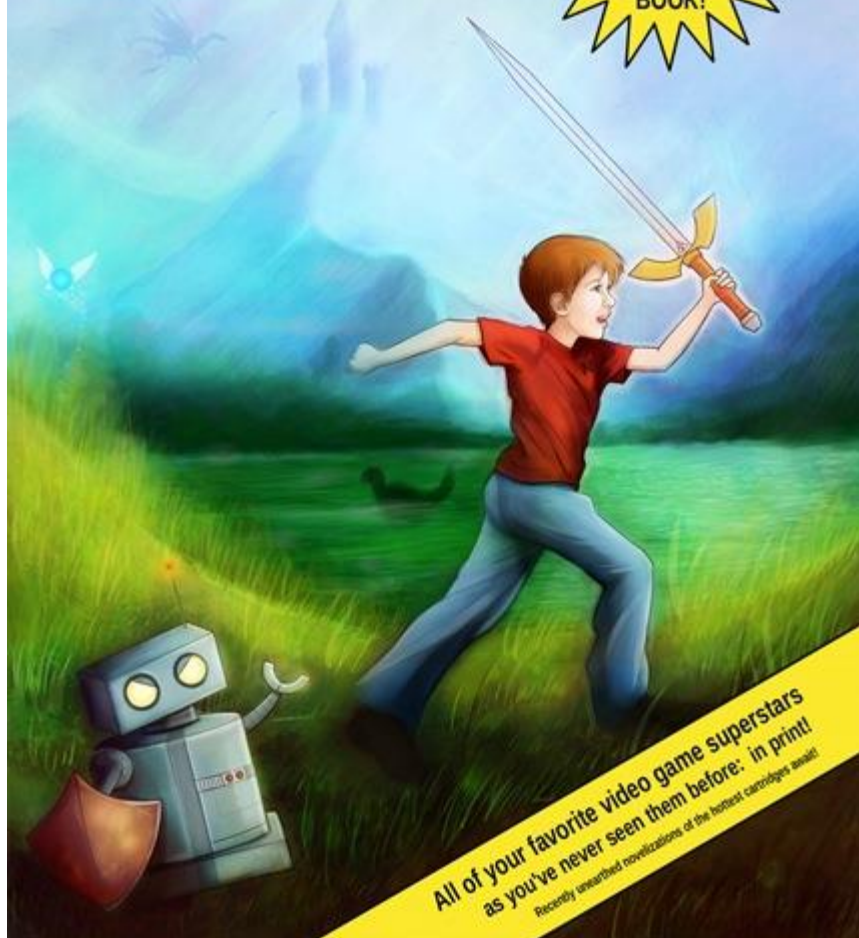


THE LOST WORLDS OF POWER

With a Foreword by H. Z. Eleven

THE
ULTIMATE
CHALLENGE
12 GAMES
IN ONE
BOOK!



All of your favorite video game superstars
as you've never seen them before: in print!

Recently unearthed novelizations of the hottest cartridges await!

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THE LOST WORLDS OF POWER

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Far be it from me to criticize the youths of today, but I think it is fair to say that they are spoiled, unlovable, and beyond rescue. This has not always been the case, however. In fact, many of you may remember the happier, headier times that we now call “the [19]90s.”

It is no exaggeration to say that my grandfather was responsible for these golden years. It was, after all, he – AND NOBODY ELSE – who hit upon the idea of marrying children's natural love of reading to the easily-marketable iconography of video games.

More of a valuable genius than any kind of disposable wordsmith, grandfather farmed out the actual writing of these books to other authors. This might register to some as demonstrating a certain prioritization of profit over quality, but I can vouch personally for the fact that grandfather selected only the fastest, least expensive authors he could find.

These incredible achievements of literature and product placement are all but forgotten today, but if you ask any adult alive what his (or, possibly, her) favorite book is, I think the odds are good that it would be one of my grandfather's. It's probably not worth checking.

But after only twelve (admittedly classic) titles, my grandfather stopped publishing.

The question on America's lips (trust me, I was there) was a simple, “Why?” And then, if anybody asked, America would elaborate: “Why did he stop publishing?”

It was a question I, to this day, was (and am to this day) unable to answer, even today. Yet theories, as theories often did, existed.

Perhaps he made so much money he ceased to exist. Perhaps he evolved into a beam of pure creativity. Perhaps he was working quietly away on his long-gestating masterpiece. Perhaps he fell down in the tub and nobody can hear him calling for help. My family resigned itself to one unpalatable truth: it was impossible to know.

But fate, as they say, led me to discover exactly what happened to my grandfather. Specifically, I was compelled by the promise of an elicited rendezvous to return to the New England cabin my family has owned for generations. (Three.)

The harlot never showed – though my check cleared well enough – but I discovered a delight beyond the carnal within an old trunk: a cache of manuscripts, dating back to the heyday of my grandfather's financial and artistic triumph.

For, you see, my grandfather may have stopped publishing these books, but he never stopped commissioning them.

What you are about to read in this volume is just a sampling of the treasures I have uncovered. The manuscripts number somewhere in the low three figures in terms of quantity, with all genres covered (from young adult action to young adult adventure, and back again), and lengths that run from hundreds of pages all the way down to a handful of paragraphs...or, in one case, a single punctuation mark.

Why these remained locked in a trunk and not forced upon children at mandatory book fairs, I cannot say. But beginning with this book – the one you hold in your hands, and which you are morally obligated to pay for if you have read this much – my grandfather's “lost” video game adaptations will be released to the world that needs them so.

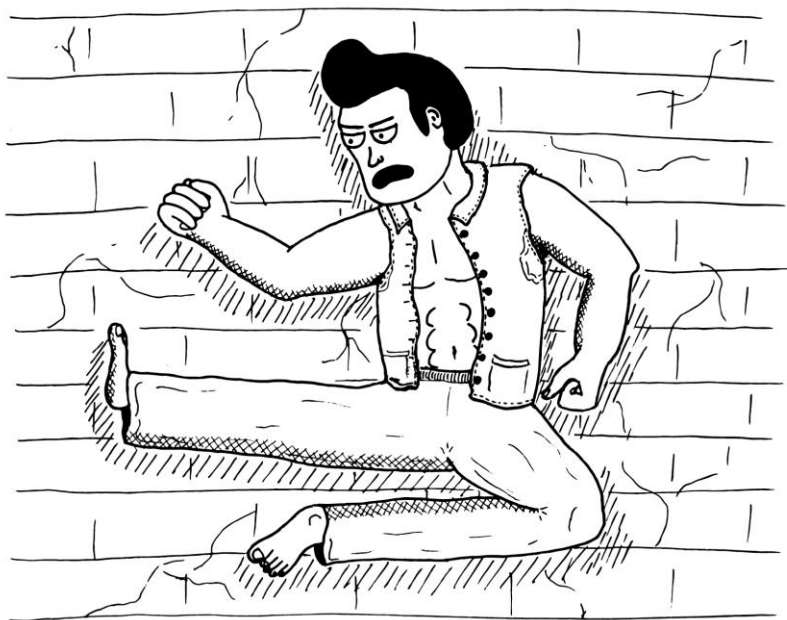
And that, dear reader, is *THE LOST WORLDS OF POWER*. A sampling of twelve of my grandfather's finest unpublished commissions, for your enjoyment, for your appreciation, and, yes, for your betterment as a human being.

There's a troubling trend in publishing today, I assume, in which literature intended for a younger audience is mocked and ignored by older readers. But I believe that adults can benefit from ham-fisted didacticism as much as anyone else. Especially when it comes as adaptations of what I can only conclude are the most popular and fondly-remembered video games of all time.

May you one day discover your reason for living, as I have now discovered mine.

Wishes,

H. Z. Eleven



RENEGADE

by Jeff Zoerner

Chapter 1

Here's the truth about the life of a Renegade, and it'll wrench your guts out: a Renegade never sleeps.

Don't believe me? Go ahead and try it. I dare you. Try to sleep all the way through the night, and it will happen to you, same as to me—the merciless ringing of the telephone will blast your pleasant dreams to bits as it summons you once again to action.

This time, as usual, it was the Chief of Police.

“Mr. K,” his voice barked over the line. “I'm glad you're home. I'm afraid this time it's serious.”

Serious...who was he kidding? My work was always serious. I shook my head. “Is it Trudy?” I asked.

“I'm afraid so. They've got her again.”

He didn't have to say who “they” were...we'd been over this tiresome grind too many times for that. It was Channel 10 News. Who else?

“I really think this time they mean business,” the Chief continued. “I'm afraid they left me a rather ominous voice mail.”

A chill ran down my spine. No matter how many times it happens, you never get used to this. You wait all your life to find a certain gal—not just any gal, but someone special, a gal you know deep in your bones is the right one—and, damn it, it turns out she was there right under your nose all along. But then, almost as if to say *no, your dreams are no good*, fate steps in. Next thing you know those dirtbags at Channel 10 News start kidnapping her every chance they get.

“Those creeps,” I muttered. “When will they ever learn?”

Here's something to understand about Channel 10 News: they weren't just in the news business—they were also in the kidnapping business. After years of trying to recruit the lovely and talented Trudy

Trout to join their team, they dispensed with the nice stuff and started resorting to force. The rats. Nothing was beneath them.

I'll give them this much—they're a determined bunch. They know the love of Trudy's life is one of the most feared fighters in the great pantheon of Renegade warriors, and still they brazenly snatch her, often from under a clear blue sky.

By now you're surely thinking: that lady must be one hell of a broadcast journalist! But, no, you see, that's just the thing. In actual fact she's a biologist—one of the most valuable research biologists in the whole damn country. That's right, she's never read a teleprompter in her life. But she could be a lion tamer for all these lunatics care—all they see is a pretty face, a body that doesn't quit, and a winning personality, so they figure she'd be a sure-fire boost for their sagging ratings.

It was more than a sensible man could bear. I was already out of bed, dressing myself with one hand as I held the phone with the other. Those bastards weren't getting away with this.

"What does the message say?" I asked. "Play it for me."

The Chief paused for a second. He was a thoughtful man...too thoughtful, some would say. "Well, Mr. K, really, I think you'd better come down to the station," he said. "I want you to hear this in person."

I looked at the clock. Three-fifty in the morning. And if you're thinking I was considering going back to sleep, that just shows how much you know about the Renegade spirit. No, not rain nor sleet nor inhospitable hour can keep a Renegade from his duty.

* * *

As I pulled on my socks, I wondered what new trick Channel 10 News had up its sleeve this time. It was always something with those guys. Sure, their battalion of Phantom Goons was formidable, more than a match for the average warrior. But let's not kid each other here—I'm no ordinary warrior. Every time I'd ever shown up at Channel 10 News headquarters and squared off against them, it was I, the legendary Mr. K, who won the day, knocking every last Goon back into the Phantom Zone. And yet they persisted in calling me to arms. I had no doubt they had some especially ugly surprise ready for me this time.

It mattered not. I am a Renegade, and a Renegade prevails.

* * *

I didn't make it to the Police Station until almost eight in the morning. First, my car didn't start. Then I waited two hours in the cold before remembering the bus service didn't run overnight. Next I went

inside and called a cab, but by the time it arrived, I had dozed off and didn't hear it honking. The second cab I called couldn't find my apartment building and gave up. But the third time was a charm. A driver identifying himself as Raheed, the Flabby Punjabi, arrived at my door. Odd...he couldn't have weighed more than 140 pounds soaking wet. Plus, he looked like an Irishman to me, but what do I know?

On the way to his cab, he launched into an incessant stream of apologies. He had the measles, he said. He hadn't slept well in three nights because the missus snored. Worst of all, he had taken a second job as a human guinea pig for experimental medications, and they impaired his driving. Boy, he wasn't kidding, either. He rear-ended three vehicles, including an ambulance, before we made it to two miles. He also vomited a great deal of mucousy goop onto the vacant seat next to him. It stunk to high heaven, and I couldn't roll down my window, because the knob was broken.

I was fuming when he pulled up in front of the Police Station. No way was I giving this loose cannon a tip. I paid the fare and bade him a terse farewell. Unfazed, he was all smiles.

"Goodbye, Mr. K," he called out to me as I went into the building. "See you in my dreams."

Not if I could help it.

The sun had come up. So much time had been wasted, and I hadn't even heard the message yet. I was in no mood for surprises. Nonetheless, one awaited me in the form of an unusually tall man in an overcoat. He stood on the top step of the police building, as if guarding the door, and watched my every move. Taking a closer look, I noticed one of his eyes was covered with a black eye patch. His good eye followed me as I ascended the steps. I tried to ignore him, but his one-eyed gaze still sent chills down my back. The man stood as still as a statue, not so much as turning an inch as I passed him. Hell, I'm not ashamed to say it—the guy gave me the creeps.

I couldn't help it. Before going in, I had to ask: "Excuse me—do I know you?"

The man failed to respond in any way. I went inside the station.

Chapter 2

The officer at the front desk recognized me and buzzed me back into the squad room. Since it was so early, many of the patrol officers hadn't gone out on patrol yet, and they lounged around the station in their underwear, smoking cigarettes and cursing. It was a time of boisterous merriment, and upon seeing me the fellows started razzing me, the way they always do. My friend Rocco Starnes was leading the festivities. He had another fellow pinned down on the ground and was on the verge of passing gas in his face.

"Well look, if it ain't the illustrious Mr. K," he said as he saw me coming in. I giggled and gave him a friendly salute. It was good to see him smile. Rocco was a ham-fisted toughie from the mean streets of the Bronx, and he deserved to have a little fun every now and then.

"You've come just in time," he went on. "I'm just about to do...*this*!" And with *this*, he let loose a quacking burst of flatulence. The place erupted in laughter. Even the chap being farted on thought it was all great fun.

"Is the Chief in his office?" I said.

"Yes he is, Dipsy-Doodle, in fact he's expecting you," Starnes replied.

I could feel my face redden. Dipsy-Doodle was his private nickname for me, and here he was blurting it out in front of everyone. All the horseplay had gone to his head, and in less than an hour, this man would be patrolling the streets! I said nothing and sidled on past the hairy crew of jokers.

The Chief didn't even notice when I entered his office. He was slumped over his desk—I was later to learn he'd been up for 108 straight hours—babbling incoherently. When I slammed the door behind me, he gave his head a startled shake and slowly started coming back to life.

"Ah...Mr. K," he said, stammering as his senses returned to him. "Thanks for coming. Yes. One second, please. I'll be right with you."

He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of NoDoz. He washed a small handful of them down with whiskey from a bottle he had perched on the hard drive of his computer. He belched, grunted, took

another big slug of whiskey, and belched again. He, too, was dressed only in his underwear, and his bloated, shaggy gut swung low.

He let out one final ear-piercing belch. “Crap,” he said. “A little barf came up that time.”

“Chief, we’ve wasted enough time already,” I cried. “Tell me what’s happened to Trudy...it could be a matter of life and death!”

Belch.

“And enough with that damn belching. Just play me the message!”

The Chief nodded. He shook his head the way a wet dog will, and having roused himself he reached over his desk, set his phone to speaker, and pressed a few buttons. “Listen,” he said.

It started with a dramatic pause. I’d recognize that dramatic pause anywhere—it was Eugenio Guitierrez, executive producer of Channel 10 News. Already I felt like punching the guy. Then he spoke:

Greetings, Chief. I know who you are, and you know who I am, and we both know that the other knows, so let’s just get straight to business, shall we? I also expect you will forward this message to the intrepid Mr. K, and I trust you will not disappoint me.

By this time, you think you know the drill. So, being the buffoon you are, you’re expecting me to proclaim that once again we have abducted the lovely Trudy Trout to force her to anchor our 7 p.m. newscast. But, my portly adversary, you only think you know the drill...for you see, it is I, not you, who is in charge of the script. That’s right, me, yes! And this time the script has been changed, moo ha ha, yes, yes!

The Chief nodded. Guitierrez was right about one thing—the Chief was something of a buffoon, and he was acting as if he were hearing the message for the first time.

Enough’s enough, don’t you know. We’ve had it up to here with Trudy Trout, with her high-falutin’ biology degrees, her pondered snoot in the air, her \$35 hairdo. We’ve given her every opportunity to come around; now the nice guy gloves come off. If she’s too good to join our news team, then she’s too good to live...period! Bwa ha ha ha ha!

“The fiend!” cried the Chief. “Are you getting this, Mr. K? This time he means to kill her!” The message concluded:

And so, my hapless Chief of Police friend, it is my pleasure to announce that tomorrow at 12 o'clock noon, Trudy Trout will be executed for her crimes against Channel 10 News and the viewers of this fair city. No more will my colleagues and I be forced to endure her arrogance and baseless rebuffs. For, you see, she will be dead. That is all.

I blew out a long puff of air. The Chief shook his head.

"I dream of a world where one day the law-abiding Trudy Trouts of the world can live in peace," he said wistfully.

I looked at my watch. It was already creeping up on 9 a.m. "So tell me, smart guy," I said to the Chief. "What was your reasoning in making me come all the way down here to listen to this? If you'd played it over the phone, like I asked, this would be over already, and everyone would be home by now, counting sheep and sawing logs. Instead, she's lying, quite literally, at death's doorstep."

The Chief pouted and shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just thought you'd want to hear it in person." His eyes grew red.

The poor oaf. He stood with his arms folded to cover his sagging man-boobs, and I noticed a pee stain on his tighty-whities. It was hard to stay angry with such a pathetic figure of man.

"Eh, don't sweat it," I said. "Anyway, I'd better hustle on over to Channel 10 News headquarters. Remember, no cops—they'll just get in the way."

"Not even one or two special commandos...?" said the Chief.

"Enough of your sass!" I snapped. "Haven't you done enough already? No cops, you heard me! Now put some clothes on, damn it, and stay close to your phone. I've got some ass kicking to do."

Chapter 3

I emerged in the radiant sunshine of a fresh day, ready to fight, ready to kill. Nothing could dampen my enthusiasm...nothing, that is, except for that same cruddy old guy, the one in the trenchcoat, Mr. Eyepatch, that attention-starved goof who couldn't get over himself. This time he was standing by the curb, leaning against a parking meter, once again watching me like a hawk. When he saw he'd caught my attention, he looked down at the meter, so I did too. Even from up on the station steps I could read what it said:

EXPIRED.

The ominous gentleman looked at me and nodded. *Expired*. What could it mean?

I had no time for guessing games. I descended the steps, hung a right, and hot-footed it over to the Channel 10 News Station building, three blocks down the street.

* * *

As always, a few Phantom Goons were posted out in front of the building. In order to be permitted inside, you had to convince them you were there on legitimate business. Well, that counted me out. They had crossed paths with me—and got their asses kicked—too many times not to know who I was and why I was there. I recognized them as well. Their names were Evan and Corey. Evan was a golden gloves boxing champion, and Cory was an all-state wrestler. In their arrogance, they figured that between the two of them, they had all of fightdom covered.

I strutted up to them, cool as a cucumber. I gave them a casual nod and then cracked wise. "I don't reckon I can convince you two assholes that I'm here to audition for weather lady."

They exchanged knowing glances, and Evan smiled. "You hear that, Corey? Looks like this douchebag showed up just in time for his date with Mr. Left," he held up his left fist, "and Mr. Right."

“Oh, someday I’ll find Mr. Right,” I assured him. “But not in this dump!”

And with this, I leapt several feet in the air with a three-quarters twist and, on the way down, clobbered him in the Adam’s apple with a spinning back fist. He fell to his knees. A few more shots like that and he’d be eating his next meal in the Phantom Zone.

As if on cue, Corey shot for my knees, attempting a double-leg takedown. I let him grab me. My back was to the gate, so all I had to do was reach back and grab hold of one of the bars. Corey jostled and tugged at me, but I wouldn’t budge. I let him struggle for a while to wear him out. Then, when he got tired, I came down on as hard as I could on the back of his neck with my elbow. I heard him swear an unseemly oath, and he released his grip.

Evan came at me with an overhand right. I pulled my head to my right, and the blow grazed my cheek. His fist continued on its trajectory and slammed into the gate behind me. He let out a loud cry. With him momentarily distracted, I brought up my knee and smacked Corey right in the snout. As he slumped forward, nearly finished, I grabbed Evan’s face and bit him as hard as I could on the cheek. He yelled, and blood began to spurt.

I thought of Trudy, trapped inside fearing for her life, and my blood boiled. She had never done a thing to harm any one of these bastards...she spent her life helping people. I focused all of my rage into the palm of my hand and shoved it with all my might into Evan’s nose.

That did it. His eyes bugged open wide, and he began to fade.

“Good riddance,” I said. “If you ever feel up for Round 2...”

It was too late—he vanished into the Phantom Zone before I could finish my hurtful zinger.

I looked down at Corey, who was a quivering mess. “You’re next,” I said, and I came down both his ears at once with my fists. That did the trick. POOF! He was gone. Two more goons dispatched to the Phantom Zone, compliments of yours truly. It never got old.

“You mess with Trudy Trout, you mess with Mr. K,” I said.

I heard a buzzer sound, and the gate swung open. I stepped through into the Channel 10 News compound.

Chapter 4

I couldn't afford to get cocky. Sure, I never had too much trouble blasting those stupid Goons into the Phantom Zone, but that was almost *too* easy. And why did the gate open by itself? I always had to scale it before. Channel 10 News might be trying to lull me into a false sense of security; I had to keep my wits about me.

I strode across a courtyard littered with pigeon feces and Zagnut wrappers and entered the building. There, inside, I encountered my second surprise: Baumer.

Baumer. Alone, standing with his hands clasped together, standing patiently. What was he doing down here? He was a Level 9 goon; I shouldn't be encountering him until the very top floor of the building. And what was he doing without backup? He was a tough customer, no doubt about it, but alone he was no match for me. Had Channel 10 News really made such a blunderous oversight?

When I stepped into the lobby, he smiled and nodded at me. "Mr. K," he said.

"Please," I said. "Call me Josef." We had known each other for so long I figured we should be on a first name basis, even if we were always trying to beat each other's brains in.

"In that case, call me Paul," he replied.

"All right, Paul," I said. "Don't mind if I do. I hope you know this is nothing personal. But you dirty no-goods are holding the love of my life up there. And I've got to get by you if I'm ever going to see Trudy again." I got into my fighting stance.

Paul stayed put, not moving a muscle. What was he up to?

"Come on, fight," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "Do me a favor and take some advice from a respectful old nemesis," he said. "It's different this time, Josef. This time they've really got the deck stacked against you." He sighed, and

his eyes shone with a soothing light. “Best you just get out of here and let this all go.”

“You know I can’t do that, Paul.”

He got into a fighting stance. “Then bring it on,” he said.

Paul was a Muy Thai boxer, and a very good one. His grappling skills were fair but not on par with his striking. The key to beating him was to get the fight to the ground, rough him up a bit, then finish things off with a classic rape choke. As usual, he took a pure striker’s stance. How many times did I have to take him down before he’d learn?

I shot in for a single-leg and had him down in seconds. He struggled a bit, but my wrestling was too strong, and soon his back was on the ground. A few seconds later I had improved my position to full mount. Never before had I had so little trouble obtaining a dominant position from the guy. I almost felt sorry!

“You know what’s coming next,” I said. “Save yourself the agony and just take me to her. You’ve got nothing to gain from her death anyway.”

A smile played across his beet-red face. “You really love that sexy old firecracker, don’t you?” he said.

“You bet your ass I do.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” And with that, he let out a shout, and I felt a sudden pain in my leg. I tried to shake it off, but I couldn’t—it hurt too much. It shouldn’t have been possible. I had him in full mount position; there was no way he could have executed a leg lock! But there I was, my right calf in searing pain, and Paul was grinning like the cat who swallowed the freaking canary. I came down on his face hard with an elbow, but this just made him cinch down on the leg harder. I cried out in torment.

“You bastard!” I said. “How are you doing that?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out!” he said.

“Get out of town! Seriously, you’re about to snap my leg here. It’s impossible...knock it off!”

Paul let loose a hearty laugh. “My dear Josef,” he said. “All things are possible...with Sambitsu!”

Sambitsu? So, it was real after all!

Like most people, I always assumed Sambitsu was some sort of urban martial arts legend. I recalled seeing an ad for it in the back of

Soldier of Fortune magazine a while back: “Sambitsu: the martial art of the future!” I had brushed it off as a fraud.

“Oh no; it’s all too real,” Paul said, as if reading my thoughts. “It’s a blend of Russian Sambo and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu developed by the Armenian military. Unlike all other forms of grappling, Sambitsu holds that being subjected to the full mount position is not a weakness, but actually a strength.”

That would explain why his resistance during our wrestling scramble was so feeble. “You mean, you could really snap my leg from that position?” I said.

“Yes! Can you believe it? I’ve been breaking dudes’ legs left and right. This Sambitsu business has really revolutionized my fighting game.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “But where did you learn it? Did you have to travel all the way to Armenia?”

Paul was unable to conceal his excitement. “See, here’s the great thing,” he said. “An Armenian national, Master Seltzer, opened up a studio a few months back, right here in town!”

“Why didn’t I hear about it?”

Paul looked at me wisely. “Sometimes a man spends too much time fighting,” he said, “and not enough time *learning* to fight.”

He was right. In my zeal to become the Renegade of greatest renown, I had allowed my anger to consume me. Hardly a day passed that I didn’t bust the head of some petty hoodlum or overconfident street fighter. In the meantime, however, my old punching bag Paul was adding a few new items to his bag of tricks. The student had surpassed the master.

“What a fool I’ve been,” I gasped.

“Chin up, there is still hope for you.”

“You mean it?” I said. “Do you really think Master Seltzer would teach a stubborn old skull cracker like me?”

“Why don’t we ask him? His studio opens up in just a few minutes. Here, let’s get to our feet. I’ll take you there.”

Paul released the leg lock, and I climbed up. I struggled to stand, so badly bruised was my leg...he really did a number on it. Damn. Paul righted himself and brushed the dust off his clothes. A smile stretched across his ashen, pockmarked face.

“I think we both knew that deep down inside, it would someday be this way,” he said. “Paul and the great Mr. K: fighting, not as enemies, but as comrades, side by side.”

“Who knows,” I said. “Maybe someday we can even become tag team champions.”

“I’d like that,” he said.

We fell into a sweaty embrace. It was the darnedest thing. Just a few minutes before, I was trying to pound his ugly kisser back into the Phantom Zone. Now here we were, walking across town to Seltzer Sambitsu, hand in hand, ready to take on the world.

Life. It is a veritable repository of surprises.

Chapter 5

Seltzer Sambitsu was in the heart of Little Armenia, nestled in the rat-infested intersection of Chinatown and Deutchstadt. From the outside, the studio looked like an abandoned warehouse. When we stepped inside, I saw that it was a rehabbed auto body shop, stripped of all its automotive finery. Indeed, it was sparse, desolate, bleak, drab, dismal, dreary, forlorn, and, above all, grungy. And there inside, gazing at us like a pack of wolves ready to attack, was the motleyest crüe of martial artists I've ever laid eyes on. It looked more like a halfway house than a world-class training facility.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" I whispered to Paul.

He chuckled dryly. "It's the right place, all right. What's the matter—you're not scared, are you?"

A wafer thin man, clad only in the white *gi* of the Orient, stepped forward. He exchanged pleasantries with Paul, and then the others in the studio resumed their training. Master Seltzer turned and looked me over.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Seltzer," I said. "Paul here speaks very highly of you. Thanks for letting me visit your studio."

As soon as the words got out of my mouth, all activity came to a halt, and everyone glared at me hatefully. I suddenly felt like the guy who farted at church. "What?" I said.

Paul let out a soft, uncomfortable snicker. "Um, Josef, it's a matter of respect that we refer to the Master as *Sensei*. And this isn't a 'studio;' it's a *dojo*."

There was a moment of excruciating silence which broke when the Sensei let out a loud belly laugh. "Har, har, har," he laughed. "Har, har, har, har, har. It is no worry, Josef K! Paul warned me you may be a little rough around the edges. But you are also known as a fearsome fighter. And so I welcome you to my dojo."

Thank God; he was a normal Joe, just like me. These other tight-asses could learn a thing or two from this guy. "Thank you, Sensei," I

replied. "Paul and I recently had a very interesting battle, and I would very much like to sign up. That is, if you'll have me."

Of *course* he would have me, I knew that. I was just being polite.

The Master gave me a cryptic smile. "That is not up to me," he said. "That is up to you."

"Oh, okay. In that case I'm in."

"No, my friend. What I mean is that you have to earn your entrance by enduring..."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at the others.

"...the *Three-Pronged Trial of the Dragon*."

I gulped. "The Three-Pronged Trial of the Dragon?"

"Yes," he answered. I could've sworn I saw the trace of a sadistic smile. "It will test your strength, your desire, and, above all, your willingness to suffer."

I looked around the studio at the gruff band of thugs, all sweating like pigs. "Well, if these assholes could do it, I suppose I can too," I said. "When does the trial begin?"

The Master and Paul exchanged knowing glances. "It already has," said Sensei Seltzer.

* * *

Two gorillas in *gis* approached. With Paul's help, they took me to a back room and stripped me naked. Normally I would have protested, but I knew it was all part of the trial. An old man who apparently lived in some sort of tool shed on the premises came into the room with a tape measure and took all my body measurements: arms, thighs, chest, and even genitals. He wrote them down in a little leather-bound notebook and handed the notebook to one of the thugs. "Take this to the Sensei," he told him. The thug complied. Then the old man dismissed Paul and the other thug as well.

I stood there feeling like a fish out of water. He looked over my nude body, nodding approvingly—not in a sexual way, but rather in a manner that said, "Yes. Mother Nature certainly did her job well here." Then he looked me in the eye. His gaze was like a laser blast to my soul. I knew I was a slave to this man.

"Are you willing to do whatever it takes to become a Sambitsu warrior?" he asked me.

I swallowed hard. "I am," I replied.

Suddenly he produced a stone goblet, seemingly out of thin air. Where did it come from? Had he been hiding it behind his back? I was stunned.

“Will you drink this?” he said.

He held the goblet up close, and I could see some small print engraved on the side: LIQUID OF RECKONING. It was filled with a brownish-green liquid; it smelled like tropical herbs and magic percolating in a sewer.

“Yes,” I said.

He handed it to me, and I took a sip. The taste was so putrid that I knew I could never finish the rest unless I boldly threw it down chug-a-lug style, so I did. I emptied the goblet, let out a rancid burp, and felt my head spin.

The old man cackled gleefully. “Good, good,” he said. “Now, if you turn around, you will see there is a chair behind you. Sit in it.”

I turned around, and, sure enough, there was the chair he mentioned. It was bulky and equipped with an elaborate system of straps. How could it possibly have materialized in the brief time it took me to swallow the liquid? There was no way anyone could have moved it in without me hearing. Stupefied, I took a seat.

The mysterious old fellow buckled together the various straps, and within a few minutes my arms, legs, and torso were all securely fastened to the massive chair. I felt like a condemned man, moments before his execution.

“Go ahead, test them,” he said. “Try to free yourself.”

I tried to break loose from the straps, but I could make no headway whatsoever. I was strapped in for the long run.

He smiled. “Nice, very nice,” he said.

“What are you going to do with me now?” I asked.

“The only thing left for me is to bid you farewell, and wish you a pleasant journey.” He shut off the light, rendering the room pitch black, and left.

Well, this wasn’t so bad. I was afraid they were going to make me do a bunch of push-ups or something.

Chapter 6

From the unmanifested suck-hole of darkness arises all that is, all that ever was, and all that threatens to be. Thrust unexpectedly into this great yawning void, my mind stripped of its normal resolve by the ravages of the mysterious, algae-laden potion, I felt my inner being—the real me—spiral aimlessly into a land that time forgot. Spinning, reeling, I journeyed across galaxies, across millennia, across heaven itself, all without leaving the confines of the bulky chair. Fear gripped me and shook me to my very bones. I could not control the tears that sprouted from my eyes; I could not resist the gripping pain that ravaged my chest. I cried out with all my being, but no sound came forth. Despair, thy name is bulky chair!

I had entered the dojo as Josef K, renegade, fearless and dominant fighter, a man in control of every jot and tittle. Now, rendered immobile in this darkened room, I became nothing and no one. The confidence that had served me so well in life up to this point was meaningless now. And while I had always been a loner, the excruciating solitude of this strange journey propelled me into a depth of sorrow I could not have imagined possible.

Then a voice arose from deep within me: *Resist nothing!*

Yes, the voice was right. It was not envelopment in the nothingness that tormented my soul—it was my resistance to it. I felt myself loosen my inner restraints, accepting all that was, all that ever could be.

And then, a sudden sound. A creak. A blinding flash of light. I squinted and strained to focus my eyes...could it be? Was it really him? There, standing in front of me, looking down with an expression of boundless disdain, was the man in the trench coat. I struggled to speak. I wanted to ask him something, to ask him everything. But my strength failed me, and, as soon as he had appeared, he was gone.

Then everything became infinitely silent and infinitely black. I ceased to be.

* * *

It was several minutes before I could recognize the two faces looking down on me. They smiled, and I felt a kindness I had never sensed before. I was lying in a cot in the same room where the bulky chair had been. I felt enveloped by peace and wished the moment could go on forever.

“Are you angels?” I heard myself say.

There was gentle laughter. “I believe our friend has come back,” said one of the men. As my head came around, I recognized the voice as the Sensei’s.

“Yes,” I heard Paul say in reply. “I must admit, I had my doubts. I knew that physically he had no equal. But his soul...that was another question.”

“Another question entirely,” added the Sensei.

“Yes, certainly, another question altogether, certainly yes,” said Paul.

“The worthiness of his soul was by no means a given.”

“No.”

“Absolutely, it was not.”

I drew in and released a huge breath. “What happened?” I asked. “Did I pass the test?”

Paul and the Sensei look at each other and smiled. “You have surmounted the first hurdle,” said the Sensei. “Now the real journey begins.”

“The first hurdle?” I said. “What would have happened if I didn’t surmount the first hurdle?”

They both looked at me queerly.

“You would have died,” said Paul. “The potion would have killed you.”

“You rats!”

“Now, now,” said the Sensei. “He who seeks to become a Sambitsu warrior must take the first step.”

I nodded. He was right about that much.

“What about the man in the trenchcoat?” I said. “The guy with the goofy eye patch. I keep running into him. What was he doing here earlier today? Is he with you guys?”

The Sensei laughed. "Earlier today?" he said. "Come now, dear fellow. You have been in that bed for seven days straight!"

Seven days? But if that was true, that would mean...

There was no way I could...

I pulled back the sheets and looked at the mattress below me. Sure enough, it was saturated with urine. I had pissed myself pretty good.

* * *

Having survived the Liquid of Reckoning, I was deemed ready to undergo the physical training of a Sambitsu warrior. I was now regarded in a whole new light by the other members of the dojo. Dropping their suspicion and scorn, they now welcomed me with open arms as a brother.

There were ten of us in all, eight men and two ladies. I learned that all warriors in training lived on the premises, dedicating themselves exclusively to training, never allowed to leave or interact with the outside world in any way until their training was completed. Since Paul had completed his training, he no longer lived at the dojo, although he did stop in to spar from time to time.

From the looks of it, a few of these other sad sacks around me had been working at this for quite a while. I was convinced, however, that with my natural talent and superhuman will power I could master this jazz within a couple of weeks.

The following morning I was introduced to the seven basic forms. As a Sambitsu warrior is sworn to secrecy, I can't provide too deep a description of the specifics of the discipline. Suffice it to say that it approached fighting in a whole different light from traditional martial arts. Although it incorporated elements of both Sambo and Jiu-Jitsu, underlying those techniques was an integrating spirit that the ordinary human could never comprehend. Only someone hearty enough to endure the Liquid of Reckoning and have his mind expanded accordingly could ever truly comprehend the Way of the Sambitsu Master.

Of course, the way you really learn to fight is by fighting, and my trainers wasted no time in throwing me into the fire. At first it was frustrating: here I was, bigger, stronger, faster, and far more experienced than these other students, but in order to progress I had to put aside everything else I had ever learned. As the Sensei explained it to me, "In order to incorporate the techniques of Sambitsu in your toolbox, you must first empty the box of all its contents. Then, after you have placed the Sambitsu tools in their proper place, you can put your other tools back in. Only then, they will be burnished by the all-encompassing flame

of Sambitsu.” Made sense to me. Paul later made a similar analogy, replacing tools with French fries.

My first sparring session was with a gangly youth named Phillip who was a few months ahead of me in training. At first glance, he looked like someone I could mop up in my sleep, but I knew better than to underestimate him. Anyone stout-hearted enough to survive the Liquid of Reckoning had more in his pants than met the eye. And, sure enough, Phillip pretty much ragdolled me the entire session. I went on to spar with Clyde, with Jennifer, with Orland, with Zisou, all the while groaning with frustration, unable to use any of my superlative striking skills to make hamburger out of their ugly mugs. However, I knew it would pay off in the end. Besides, my striking skills hadn’t vanished: they were simply taking a well-deserved vacation.

As I expected, my training progressed at a record-breaking clip. Even the Sensei was impressed, and he didn’t impress easily.

At first I wasn’t allowed to spar with Paul. The Sensei believed our familiarity with one another’s styles might impede our development as warriors. After a while, once I had my feet firmly planted in *terra sambitsua*, we were permitted to train together. The first time we went at it, Paul tried the exact same trick he’d pulled on me back at Channel 10 News. I had none of it. Paul was the one who wound up in an excruciating ankle lock, and he laughed appreciatively.

“Turn-about’s fair play,” he said. “Fantastic! How did you get so awesome?”

“I dunno,” I said. “But I sure could use a Pepsi.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “Let’s take five and chill in the break room.”

We waited until the Sensei wasn’t looking and then snuck off to the back. The vending machine was out of Pepsi, so we both had to settle for Diet Mr. Pibb.

“So, what’dya say?” said Paul. “Was I right? This Sambitsu stuff seems like it’s right up your alley.”

“You got that right,” I said. “When the International Renegade Commission beholds my new and improved ass-kicking ability, they’ll have no choice but to upgrade me to a Level 9.”

“Level 9? Wow! Isn’t that the highest?”

“Yes, you betcha!”

Paul took a long swig of his soda and then belched. "So, I guess when this is over it's back to slapping around Phantom Goons for you," he said.

"I guess," I said. "It's what I do. And how about you? Have you gone back to working for Guitierrez?"

Paul gave me a funny glance. "Oh yeah, I guess there's no way you'd know," he said. "Guitierrez got busted on a homicide rap by your Chief of Police friend. He's going away for a long time."

"I'll be damned."

"Yeah. Anyway, a new evil kingpin has kind of taken over, this dude named Hector 'Jácare' de Souza. He pays twice what Guitierrez used to. Compared to de Souza, Guitierrez was a stingy old pile of donkey crap."

"Sounds like a good gig."

"It is."

I finished my soda. "Paul," I said, "you've blackened my eyes and bruised my ribs, and I've knocked you back into the Phantom Zone more times than I can count. I guess you could say we've had our fair share of scrapes. But this Sambitsu tip you gave me...brother, it's the real deal. I really owe you. You know, I don't know what the future holds for us. Maybe someday I'll have to kill you, although I hope it never comes to that. But even if it does, I want you to know I'm forever in your debt."

"Josef K," he said. "You've taught me more about valor and persistence than anyone else I've known. Let's just say we're even."

I smiled. I extended my hand to him across the table, and he shook it.

"Come on, you rascal," I said. Let's get back to work."

We slammed down the rest of our Diet Mr. Pibb (delicious stuff, by the way), tossed our empty cans and snuck back into the main studio. Since my focus was on not getting busted by the Sensei, I wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted me as we stepped back onto the mats. There, on the far side of the floor, conversing with the Sensei in hushed tones, was none other than the man in the overcoat.

This time it was no pond scum-induced hallucination. It was really him. As I stood there, feeling the blood in my veins turning to ice water, he glanced over and looked me straight in the eye. The Sensei said something, and the man nodded.

Who was this blasted man of mystery? And what did he want from me?

Chapter 7

Exactly 43 days after my training began, I completed the coursework for black belt in Sambitsu, and if you don't think that was a new world's record, you've got rocks in your head. Fastest black belt ever. *Boom!*

In fact, even though I had begun my training long after most of the others, I was the first one in our group to graduate. Rather than holding me in envious contempt, my fellow warriors were delighted by my progress. The Sensei announced that the following day would be dedicated to my completion ceremony. I looked around at my comrades. There wasn't a dry eye in the bunch.

Tyrell, who had probably been my biggest rival in the pack, came over and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Before today, I revered Moses, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul above all men," he said. "But to hell with those losers! You, Josef K, are my new idol—the greatest hero who ever lived."

That evening in celebration I chugged down a bottle of Listerine from the Sensei's private bathroom. It's a little-known fact that Listerine is 20% alcohol, and if you put away an entire bottle you can get a pretty good buzz. In a frenzy of contented drunkenness, I entertained my bunk mates by dancing a rousing can-can for three hours straight.

The ceremony, set for 10 a.m. the next day, was held in the front of the studio, on the sparring mats. For the occasion, the Sensei hired a 45-piece brass band, three tumbling acrobats, and a Shao-Lin minister. At the top of the bill was Freddie the Chimp. Pretty much everyone in town knew Freddie from TV; he appeared in zillions of commercials for a local used car lot.

I have to say, Freddie was nowhere near as cute in person as he was on TV. In fact, he was a surly ne'er-do-well. He was in charge of giving me my black belt, and when it came time to hand it over, he slapped me across the face with it. Then he just stood there, leering, daring me to take it from him.

“You watch it, you stupid monkey,” I hissed under my breath. “I know Sambitsu.”

Freddie thought better of his recalcitrance and gave me the belt. I tied it around my waist, and everyone cheered. The brass band played a rousing rendition of “I Just Died in Your Arms Tonight,” and Freddie did a jig.

It’s funny what goes through your mind at a time like that. Watching my fellow warriors as they clapped and danced around the floor, and the Sensei, who stood in dignified stillness, beaming with pride, I thought I was on the top of the mountain. Nothing could ever trouble me again. I had met the stiffest challenge of my life and prevailed—what could possibly stop me now?

As if to disabuse me of such foolish notions, fate reared its ugly head. As quickly as the music had roared to life, it now stopped. There was a collective gasp as the door to the studio opened. First a chilling gust of wind blew in, announcing the gruesome guest that was about to pay us a visit.

By now, unless you’re a complete idiot, you’ve guessed who it was. Yes, you got it right: the man in the trenchcoat. The asshole!

Chapter 8

I could stand it no more. “What’s going on?” I shouted, pointing at the man. “I see this shady character every time I turn around. I demand to know—who is this guy?”

My comrades whispered heatedly to one another until the Sensei raised his hand. “Calm down, people, I command you!” he cried. The studio fell silent. “The Inspector is a friend of the dojo and is welcome to come by any time he sees fit,” he continued. “This sort of outburst is inexcusable,” he went on, glaring at me. “This ceremony is over as of this moment. Josef K, you have what you came for. Now you may leave. The rest of you have work to do...so I suggest you get to it!”

I looked over to Paul, who had come down for the ceremony. He shrugged helplessly. He had no better idea of what was going on than I did.

And so the celebration in my honor came to an ignominious halt. I cinched my belt tightly and stood up straight. I was determined to walk out with my head held high, the presence of this ghoulish “Inspector” notwithstanding. I gave a salute to my fellow warriors, bowed to the Sensei, and made my exit.

* * *

It was the first time I’d seen the light of day in many weeks. Summer was leaving us early, and a moist coolness traveled with the breeze, bringing fall in its wake. The new season felt right; I stepped into it a new, improved me, a Sambitsu warrior, probably the best trained fighter walking the face of the earth. I took a leak on the sidewalk and started the long walk home.

“Excuse me, Joseph K. You will wait, please.”

I turned around. It was the trenchcoat-clad Inspector; he had followed me out of the dojo.

“Listen, I don’t know who you are,” I said. “I just want to go home and take a hot shower, okay?”

“You will come with me, please.”

I sneered. “Why should I come with you? What the hell kind of inspector are you, anyway? Are you with the police? No one even knows who you are. So dig this, you creep.”

I squeezed out a fart. He was unfazed.

“I’ll be going home now, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

He shook his head. “Come with me, please.”

“No!”

I continued on my way. The Inspector followed me for a few blocks, and then he fell back. After a half mile or so I looked around, and he was nowhere in sight.

“What a blockhead,” I muttered to myself.

When I got to my apartment building, I realized I left my keys back at the dojo, so I couldn’t get in. I was afraid I’d run into that idiot Inspector if I ran back to fetch them, so I opted to pay a visit to my building’s on-site manager instead.

He answered the door promptly when I knocked. I could hear the TV blaring from inside. Not even noon, and he was already drunk off his ass and watching *The Steve Harvey Show*.

“Yes?” he said, adjusting his belly so that it hung over his trousers more comfortably.

“Hey, I’m sorry to bug you. Can you let me in my place? I don’t have my keys.”

He gave me a strange look. “Just go on up,” he said.

I shook my head. “Listen, you senile clown, I don’t have my keys,” I repeated.

He scowled. “Just go on up,” he said. “You’ll see.”

He shut the door.

“*Just go on up. You’ll see,*” I muttered. I had half a mind to kick his door down and beat him senseless. But still, I was curious.

I walked up four flights of stairs to my apartment. Sure enough, the front door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open and went in.

“Greetings. We have been expecting you.”

It took my eyes a second to adjust to the dark room; no one had bothered to turn on the lights. I looked around my front room and saw three men lounging about, all of them in trenchcoats.

“Jesus, what is it with you guys?” I said. “Don’t you ever take off your damn coats?”

The place was a mess. They had raided the liquor cabinet, littered the floor with empty whiskey and vodka bottles, and peed all over the kitchen counter. Nonetheless, when I entered, they conducted themselves in a most sober and officious manner.

One of them stood up. “You will come with us, please.”

“Here we go again,” I said. “What are you talking about? Come where?”

“To Headquarters. Please. You will come.”

“Headquarters? Hell no, bitch! Do you even know who I am? I am a Level 9 Renegade, the most perfect fighting machine walking the face of planet Earth. So you get your stinky ass the hell out of my face. *Now!*”

He started to respond, but one of the other agents raised a hand and stopped him. He reached one hand into his trenchcoat and said, “My dear Mr. K. Let us be reasonable. As we speak, one of two things is possible: either I have a pistol in my trenchcoat, or I do not. If I do, and you continue to resist, your combat prowess will be of no use to you. If I do not, perhaps you are able to overpower the three of us, but then you merely postpone things until another time.” He adjusted his glasses over the bridge of his nose. “The sensible action, of course, is to comply.”

He was right about one thing. Even I was no match for a bullet. Or was I...?

“Now, please come,” said the first man. “To Headquarters. You come with us. Please.”

My fate, once adrift in the wind, blowing freely hither and thither, now seemed etched in solid granite, or maybe even tungsten. “Let me grab my jacket,” I said. “It’s getting a little chilly out there, you know.”

Chapter 9

The sun had vanished. The icy autumn winds blew in a set of menacing black clouds that coated the sky with a gloom most despicable. The three agents accompanying me turned up their collars to shield their exposed necks from the biting cold.

Up ahead, trotting down the sidewalk in our direction, came a little boy. I recognized him at once: little Timmy Taylor, one of my most ardent admirers. He had a firm, stubby rump and an unwavering desire to do what was right. His face lit up as he saw me walking his way.

“Mr. K, Mr. K!” he cried gleefully. “Can you show me how to check that leg kick, the way you promised, huh? Oh, would you, Mr. K?”

We came to a stop. I looked down at his exuberant face, at his carefree posture, at the premature stubble that was starting to sprout up on his seven-year-old face. How could I bear to disappoint him?

“I’m afraid I can’t now, Timmy,” I said. “See these men? They’re taking me to Headquarters. That’s right, Headquarters, Timmy. For although I am wholly innocent—or nearly wholly innocent, as may or may not turn out to be the case—these loathsome cowards seem hell-bent on railroading me for this or that, for such and such an offense, that I committed—or, should I say, *allegedly* committed—at some time or other. It’s making my head spin, Timmy, I’ll tell you that.”

He looked up, comprehending nothing. My heart ached as I continued.

“But I don’t want it to make your head spin too. So I’m asking you, Timmy...I’m asking you with all my heart, with every ounce of sincerity I have left in these old bones...I’m asking you to walk away. Just turn around and walk away, son, and pretend you never saw me. Can you do that, Timmy? Can you walk away and never speak of this again?”

Tears welled up in his trusting eyes. He didn’t want to abandon his hero, but neither did he want to disobey. Choking back his sobs, he spat his words out. “Yes, Mr. K,” he said. “Yes, I can do that. Yes sir.”

Yes, I can. And God bless you, Mr. K. May the saving grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ protect you now and always. God bless and keep you, Mr. K!”

I turned to look at one of my captors, and he nodded. I dropped to one knee, and Timmy flew into my arms for one final embrace. I felt the salty warmth of his tears trickle down my face into the corners of my lips. It was all I could do not to cry myself.

“Goodbye, Timmy,” I whispered. “I shall never forget you.”

The captor to my right tugged at my sleeve. “Come,” he said.

We parted ways forever, Timmy and I: he to return to his abusive step-father, and I to keep a date with destiny.

* * *

How I could have lived in this city my whole life and missed this massive building is beyond me. Taking up an entire city block, it towered above all else, dominating the skyline. Across the massive main entrance were posted three gigantic letters: PJS.

“Ha, ha,” I said. “You guys are the Pee-Jays.”

My companions were not amused. “People’s Judicial System,” one of them said. “The *real*/law of the land.”

Well, that didn’t sound too promising. We ascended the front steps, and there, waiting for us at the top, was the original man in a trenchcoat, Eye Patch Guy, the one the Sensei called the Inspector.

“I think you are beginning to see,” he said, looking straight at me, “that the wheels of justice grind forward inexorably, your childish aversion to due process notwithstanding.”

I’d had it with this guy. “Blah, bleh, bluh,” I muttered. “Speak English, you moron.”

He joined the other three, and they escorted me into the building. We stepped into an enormous empty lobby, marble, high-ceilinged, dizzying in its scope...a more desolate and austere space I could never have imagined. The door behind us creaked and banged as it slammed shut, heralding our arrival to an indifferent universe.

“The Examining Magistrate is on the 23rd floor,” said the Inspector.

“Well, good for him,” I said.

We walked across the lobby to the elevators, our steps echoing behind us. I belched loudly just to test the acoustics, and, sure enough, it

reverberated throughout the high ceiling and marble walls for a good two minutes. I felt my heart skip a beat. It seemed that everything that happened here was drawn out almost beyond endurance.

I noticed as we reached the elevators that they were all made of glass. I was pretty excited. The only time I'd ever been on a glass elevator before was at the Burj al Arab in Dubai, and then I was so drunk I hardly remember anything of it.

“Oh boy, glass,” I squealed.

The Inspector snorted. “Grow up,” he said.

“Why, so I can be like you?” I retorted.

At last the elevator car came, sounding its arrival with a loud ding. The doors opened to an empty car. One of my captors indicated with his head that we were to go in.

I stood stock still, transfixed, petrified.

The captor tugged at my arm. “Come,” he said. I could feel the Inspector's hand at my back, urging me forward.

I stumbled into the car. I don't know how I knew it—maybe it some relic of wisdom I had gained from the Liquid of Reckoning—but when the doors closed behind us, my fate would be sealed. I felt an unbearable tightness in my chest as the doors slammed shut with a roar. And so it had come to pass—I was in the belly of the beast.

Chapter 10

Soon I realized why the elevators were made of glass: to intimidate poor schleps like me as we looked out upon the vast, cold-blooded bureaucracy. Each floor of the building was devoted to the persecution of a different class of crime—larceny, assault, embezzling, and so on. Such hubris...even Dante's hell only had nine levels. As we ascended to the 23rd floor, I looked out upon a sea of humanity, captive, accused, subject to an endless procession of prosecution by a relentless judicial machine.

My heart sank.

When the elevator car reached our destination, a mechanical voice droned from a speaker overhead: "FLOOR TWENTY-THREE. MISCELLANY."

The door opened. "Come," said the Inspector.

He stepped out, and I followed. "Hey, what about them?" I said, indicating the other three, who remained in the elevator. "Aren't they coming with us?"

The Inspector grunted. "Too many questions," he said. The door closed behind us, and the other three men in trenchcoats were gone, soon to fade from my memory like a dream upon waking. We walked ahead.

I couldn't help but notice that our surroundings were entirely gray. The floor, the walls, the ceiling—all gray. We passed various offices, each decorated with gray furniture and gray cubicle partitions. It was soul-stifling. Making matters worse was the warm, musty air. Most likely no fresh air had entered the building since it was erected. My head grew light as we navigated our way through a maze of twisting halls.

Suddenly I saw a familiar figure coming down the hall in our direction. No, it wasn't possible! But I'd recognize that impeccable three-piece suit and world-class mustache anywhere.

When he saw me, he stopped and smiled. I stepped up to get a closer look.

“Guitierrez?” I said. “How can this be? I heard the Chief threw your sorry ass in the clink.”

Guitierrez nodded. “It is so,” he said. “But that was then. And now, I walk out of these halls a free man.”

“A free man? This is madness!” I sputtered. “You’re one of the five most criminally-inclined individuals alive today!”

“Be that as it may,” he said. “The People’s Judicial System has acquitted me of all charges,” he said. “Anyway, I must be running along...*¡pinche pendejo!*”

I looked to the Inspector. It couldn’t be so. He smiled cruelly and let out a mirthless chuckle. “Forget your friend the Chief and his so-called police department,” he said. “All that concerns you is what happens here at the PJS.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Guitierrez would suffer no consequences for his reign of terror at Channel 10 News? I was inconsolable; I hung my head in mourning for innocence lost. The Inspector nudged me, indicating that we were to continue on our way.

Finally we arrived at our destination, a huge wooden door with a plaque that read: MISCELLANY. SUBDIVISION 12, SUNDRY INFRACTIONS.

Holy crap. Sundry infractions? Those were the worst kind!

We went in. It took me several seconds to register where I was: in a giant courtroom, practically the size of a basketball arena, with hundreds of spectators sitting in absolute silence. When the door shut behind us, a sudden murmur rippled through the crowd and then, just as quickly, died. From two different tables at the center of the floor, two men stood, one of them old, the other about my age. I realized they were attorneys.

A bailiff strode from the back of the hall to the judge’s bench. “All rise for the honorable Judge Lisa Marie Moon Unit Haddaway.”

In walked the judge, a prune-faced specimen with jet-black hair that was obviously dyed. She took her position perched behind an elevated desk and told everyone to be seated. The Inspector led me to the table on the left and gestured with his head to the nervous young attorney already seated there. I understood I was to take a seat beside him. Then the Inspector walked off...where to, I do not know to this day.

The bailiff spoke. “The case of *The People v. Josef K*, your honor,” he said.

The judge nodded. “Will the defendant please stand?” she said. She had the croaking voice of a three-pack-a-day smoker. I knew her type.

My timid attorney and I rose. The attorney shuffled back and forth nervously from foot to foot. It wouldn't surprise me if mine was his first case ever.

"To the charges brought against you," said the judge, "how do you plead?"

I started to speak, but my attorney interrupted me. "Your honor," he said, "I know this is unorthodox, but we must beg you from the onset for a little latitude. For you see, my client represents a unique instance in the annals of civil law. He could enter a plea of 'guilty,' but that would be in obvious disregard of the recent reinterpretations of the applicable law that could most certainly be brought to bear upon his case." He cleared his throat. "Or, he could plead 'not guilty,' but it seems imprudent to demand of the system a lengthy and costly case when, in the final analysis, the letter of the law is quite clear regarding which portion of his actions constitutes an infraction and to what extent."

The judge put a finger to her chin and nodded, lost in thought. "Yes, Mr. Mises, I'm listening," she said. "What do you propose?"

"Your honor, I bring your attention to *The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico v. Avila*," said my attorney, and he launched into an elaborate explanation that damn near put me to sleep. All I wanted to know was one thing: was I innocent, or was I guilty?

The judge seemed halfway convinced by my advocate's cockamamie diatribe. The lawyer at the other table jumped to his feet.

"Your honor, I must object most strenuously!" he cried.

"Objection overruled," said the judge.

"But your Honor, I haven't even stated what my objection is..."

"Overruled!"

The miserable old fellow slumped back into his seat. I took it as a positive sign. I scrutinized my lawyer's face to see whether he felt the same, but beneath his greasy veneer of sweat and a host of nervous tics, he was as unreadable as the Q'uran.

It was agreed that the proceedings would proceed as a "summary trial," a one-day affair in which only friendly witnesses would be allowed to testify. The other lawyer pitched a fit—apparently he had over 300 people lined up as hostile witnesses—but in the final analysis the law's the law, and it cannot be tempered to accommodate the whims of some daft law-jockey in a \$90 suit.

The trial began, and we called our first witness. In came Mr. Jenkins, the on-site property manager for my apartment building. He came in wearing his customary wife-beater with his trousers sagging down below his butt crack, and, as usual, he appeared drunk as a skunk. When the bailiff tried to swear him in, Jenkins had to get past a half dozen thundering belches before he could even get out an “I do.”

He was there to attest to my moral character: trustworthy, law-abiding, always on time with rent. But, when questioned, he instead went off half-cocked about what a pain in the ass I was. Apparently he was still pretty pissed about me showing up at his door earlier that day, requesting to be let into my apartment. My attorney tried to steer the conversation toward more profitable channels, but Jenkins was not easily deterred.

“And the guy *stinks*,” he roared at one point. “I mean, a certain amount of body odor is normal, sure, but this guy smells like a goddamn possum died in a septic tank and was left to rot for a few months. What the hell is up with that?”

What the hell indeed? *He* was the one with B.O., not me!

My attorney waved his hands, signaling the end. “No more questions!”

It was the other attorney’s turn to cross-examine. He rubbed his hands together, looking like a rabid wolf ready for the kill.

“Mr. Jenkins,” he began, his tone an imperious bellow. “What, in your considered opinion, can we surmise about a man who emits such a stench?”

“I dunno,” answered Jenkins, “but God damn, his stink is enough to knock over an elephant.”

“An elephant, you say. And is it possible that such a stench, under the right conditions, could *kill* the elephant?”

Jenkins thought for a second. “Kill it?” he asked. “I guess so. Sure, why not?”

A collective gasp arose from the jury and spectators. The attorney stood with his hands on his hips, announcing with his cocky pose that victory was now a mere formality. And now for the *coup de grace*. “And would you say,” he thundered, “that it is more likely that such a man be innocent, or that he be *guilty*?”

Jenkins whistled softly. “A guy who stinks like that? Come on!” he said. “What the hell do *you* think? Guilty!”

The courtroom went up for grabs. The judge pounded her gavel repeatedly and called for order. The ensuing uproar was so booming that you could barely hear the attorney yell out, “No further questions!”

This was worse than anything I could have envisioned. I turned to my attorney. “Yo, Perry Mason, so much for that ‘friendly witness,’” I whispered. “Who’s next on your list?”

Sweat beaded up on his forehead. “What’dya mean, next on my list?” he said. “He was it! Jenkins was our only witness! Our entire case rested on his greasy shoulders!”

“Get out of town!” I said. “Come on, quick, call someone else before the damage he did sinks in too deep.”

“No, don’t you understand? I’m not joking around—there *is* no next witness. He was my only one!”

“What?” I spat. “Then what about all that crap you were talking about earlier, the *extenuato ipso facto* and the *judicimiento sumario quid pro quo* and all that? Surely you have some other tricks up your sleeve...?”

His face reddened, and he threw up his hands. “No,” he said. “It is finished.”

“Just like that?”

He sniffed. “Sure, blame me! You know, it wouldn’t hurt if you’d take a shower once or twice in your life.” He rose to his feet. “Your honor, the defense rests,” he announced.

The opposing lawyer rose as well. “Your honor, Mr. Mises is out of order. It is the prosecution’s turn.” He cleared his throat and then stated, “The prosecution rests.”

“Then the defense rests as well,” said my attorney.

The judge banged her gavel. “The summary trial of Josef K has concluded,” he said. “Mr. K, you are free to go.”

I remained in my seat, stunned.

“Didn’t you hear me? Mr. K, I said you are free to go.”

“Go where?” I said. No reply. I didn’t get it. Didn’t they have to hold me in custody while the jury deliberated my verdict? I looked around for the Inspector. He was nowhere to be found. It was surreal. Surely I couldn’t just get up and leave...?

My attorney gathered up the papers from the table before him. Just to see what would happen, I stood up. No one said a thing.

I leaned forward. “Hey, great job with everything,” I said to my attorney. “Thanks a bunch.”

He nodded, not even bothering to look my way.

I casually walked to the exit and joined the throng of spectators on their way out. No one objected. I passed right in front of the bailiff; he said nothing. Nor did anyone protest when I stepped through the door. Since I didn’t know my way out of the building, I stuck close to the exiting crowd, and before long we arrived at the elevators. I took one last look around, expecting someone to try to stop me.

Nothing. The elevator car arrived, and a bunch of us got in.

In a few minutes, I departed the building and walked home as if nothing had happened. I was in a state of minor shock and wondered to myself: had anything really happened?

Chapter 11

Several weeks went by. I was eager to resume my old life, to return to battle, to put my newly-acquired Sambitsu skills to a trial by fire, but no assignments came my way. I spent most of my time watching reruns of *The Rifleman* and polishing off box after box of Screaming Yellow Zonkers. Life passed as if blanketed by a murky haze; things that once were clear to me became fuzzy, and before long I was lying supine 23 hours a day in the undirected lethargy of Oblimovism. Please, someone call me, I thought to myself. Someone...anyone.

It was a foregone conclusion that such a decadent lifestyle would lead to illness. I developed some sort of black mold crud in my lungs, and every breath became a soul-crushing ordeal. After a while I could bear it no longer, and I broke down and went to the emergency room.

“Go home,” they told me. “There’s nothing wrong with you. And stop wasting taxpayer money, you goddamn tool.”

I returned to my couch, sick down to the marrow of my bones but deemed in perfect health by the medical establishment. Soon I lapsed into brain fever. My life was transformed into a nightmarish parade of grotesque images that swirled demonically from one edge of my consciousness to the other.

By this point, I would have welcomed anything, including a nuclear holocaust...anything to shake me from the swamp of death-sludge in which I was submerged.

Just when I thought I would perish from the sheer evil of it all, a loud knock sounded at my door.

I sat up, probably for the first time in months. “Who’s there?”

The door swung open, and in came the three trenchcoated agents from my past. Two remained at the door, and one stepped over to the couch.

“It is time,” he said.

I stood. My legs were shaky underneath me. My lungs burned, and my head twisted and churned with fever. "Lead the way," I said.

I stumbled with my first few steps. The two other agents came over and stood at each side of me to support me. "You will need a coat and a hat," one of them said. I nodded. I hadn't so much as looked out the window in months. They helped me dress for the elements, and then, with their assistance, I made it downstairs and out of the building.

The frigid air struck my face in one frosty blast after another. A heavy snow came down; somewhere in the recesses of my brain I recalled that usually it doesn't snow in the winter when it's this cold. Fortunately, the sidewalks were well kept, and with the agents' support I was able to remain on my feet as they led me further and further from home.

We turned into one alley after another. Before long I no longer recognized where I was—the course of my everyday life had never given me cause to travel these disreputable backroads. Because of the deplorable condition of my lungs, I fatigued easily. I grew more and more delirious. "My case," I muttered as they dragged me along. "The People's Judicial System. The courtroom. My case...*what was the outcome of my case?*"

No one replied for several moments. "It was not favorable," one of them said finally.

"Please. You come," said another.

They led me to the outskirts of the city, to an open field. The snow on my face was melting and trickling into my eyes. I could feel my nose run uncontrollably, the way it always did when it was this cold. We tromped through a foot of snow to the center of the field, and stopped. Other than the tracks of a rabbit or two, ours were the only footsteps that had broken the snow cover.

"The knife," said one of the agents. "Which of you has the knife?"

The other two agents exchanged glances. "I have no knife," said one.

"Nor I," said the other. Turning to the first agent, he said, "The knife was your responsibility."

The agents looked at one another accusingly. "Come on, one of us has got to have the knife."

They continued glancing back and forth, shaking their heads and shrugging. Then one of them said to me, "How about you? Do you have a knife?"

It just so happened I had a huge steak knife tucked into the back of my trousers. I must have placed it there sometime during the past several weeks, a product of delirium-driven tomfoolery.

“Yes,” I said. I handed it to the one who asked for it.

One of them gave me a strong push, and I fell backwards into the snow. The one with the knife dropped down and placed a knee on my abdomen. “It will be more efficient this way,” he told me.

One of the two standing asked me, “Do you have any final statement or request?”

I did my best to focus my swirling brain on the question at hand. All I had ever wanted was to be a Renegade, to annihilate Phantom Goons and save the day, to settle down with the lovely Trudy Trout and raise a family. And now it was all gone. There was nothing left to live for.

“No,” I said.

The agent kneeling on me reared the knife back, pulled it overhead, took a few practice swings downward toward my heart, and then, feeling confident, brought it down a final time, driving it deep into my chest.

My head began to buzz. No “life flashing before your eyes” for me...life was departing quickly and uneventfully.

“Like a mangy dog!” I cried, as if this crowning indignity to a once-renowned Renegade must echo throughout the ages, reminding generations to come of the pitfalls inherent in a life squandered.

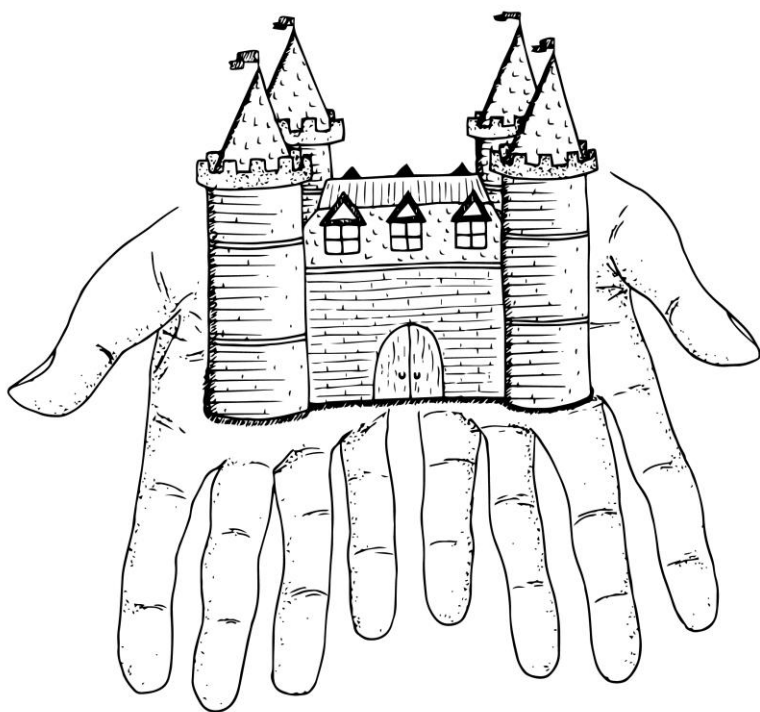
THE END

ALTERNATE ENDING 1: “Like a mangy dog!” I cried, announcing to an uncaring cosmos my shame, my anger, and my disappointment, but mostly my shame.

THE END

ALTERNATE ENDING 2: “Like a mangy, stinking mutt!” I cried. My words rose to the heavens and blanketed the skies to serve for ever more as a testimonial firmament, sealing in a collective awareness that once a foul-smelling man enjoyed brief success as a Renegade warrior before falling into the inevitable precipice of his own stinky doom.

THE END



MILON'S SECRET CASTLE

by R.J. Burgess

Chapter 1

Milon had never owned a castle before – let alone a secret one – yet the contract in his hand said he owned one all the same.

He stood in the middle of the drawbridge looking up at a castle he hadn't even heard of until a few hours ago. It looked like something out of a book of Medieval clichés.

“And you're sure this is all mine?” he piped, looking up at the estate agent standing beside him.

The estate agent grinned down at Milon and chuckled good-naturedly. His name was Hudson. He was a tall man (although that really wasn't saying very much since Milon was so short that pretty much everyone looked tall to him), sharply dressed in a black and gold pin-striped suit with a neatly-cropped goatee beard and greasy slicked-back hair. A fake Rolex watch hung from his wrist alongside no fewer than five signet rings and a cheap leather-bound briefcase clutched in his hand. “Of course it's yours!” the agent confirmed. He ruffled Milon's hair affectionately.

“Like legally and everything?” Milon's voice had never quite gotten around to breaking – a fact he blamed on years of being wedged as a kid – but he tried to sound as authoritative as he could. He looked down at the contract in his hands, his eyes trailing over the lines of small print.

“Son, this contract is so watertight, you could practically go sailing in it!” Hudson said with a grin that positively sparkled. “Look here: your name's Milon, right?”

Milon had to admit that it was.

“And now here: ‘The BUYER’ – that's you – ‘Hereby undertakes to be the sole proprietor of the lands and properties listed hereinafter until such a time as he chooses to relinquish his claim over said deed or until he is found to be in breach of the contractual pre-conditions listed in paragraphs 4-8).’ And look here: ‘The aforementioned lands and properties shall be deemed to constitute 55,000 acres of prime real estate located in a secret place, including full rights over all minerals and life forms located on or within said land.’”

“Wow,” said Milon. He'd only understood maybe one tenth of what Hudson had just read to him. With language that complicated, it just had to be legal!

And to think he'd only paid \$10 for this place!

Milon looked up at the castle in front of him. It was made of good solid stone, ancient and moss-covered, with a strong iron portcullis drawn shut over the front. High ramparts stared down at him from above, their surfaces studded with arrow slits and their corners bolstered by four round towers with battlements on top. He looked at the drawbridge and the moat flowing underneath. He looked at the sky which crackled with lightning.

It was a castle all right.

"It just seems a little too easy," he admitted. Milon's mother – God rest her soul – had always warned Milon about doing things that were too easy. That was one of the reasons she had never stepped in to help him while he was being beaten up at school. Every time Milon had come home with his blue dungarees all muddied and torn and his favourite blue cap now more like a scarf hanging around his neck, she had sent him to bed without any supper and told him to think about his failings as a human being. She insisted it helped to build character.

"You've got to learn to fight your own battles!" his mother shrieked at him as he slumped dejectedly into his room. "What'll you do when I'm not around anymore, hey? You think someone's going to magically step in and help you out? Quit trying to make things easy for yourself and grow a bloody backbone!"

Well, Milon was damned if he was going to make the same mistake again. "I mean, this place only cost me \$10 to buy... I just can't believe that no one else is interested in buying it at that price."

"Of course no one else is interested!" the estate agent replied. "I mean think about it – it's called a 'secret castle' for a reason! If there were other buyers, that would mean that other people knew about it...and then it wouldn't be much of a secret, would it?"

Milon had to admit there was a certain logic to that.

Hudson gestured for Milon to follow him across the castle grounds. Fifty-five thousand acres. Rolling green fields and privet hedges cut into interesting shapes, a well-ordered flower garden and a cute little pond with fish in it. At the far end of the castle grounds there stood what looked like some sort of bomb shelter next to a small wooden hut bearing the words, 'Gift Shop.'

That was reassuring. Every castle he had ever been to had had a gift shop in it. He was pleased to see that his own was no exception.

Milon's legs were so tiny, he had to take two steps for every one of Hudson's. His next question came out as little more than a breathless pant and Hudson waved it away with a casual flick of his wrist.

"I'm sure all your questions will be answered in time!" he said. "Just look at this place! Twenty bedrooms, two kitchens, a chapel, a fully-stocked armoury and a massive wine cellar!" He paused next to a giant

catapult lying in the middle of the pathway and winked at Milon. “The beach is just a stone’s throw away, too.”

Milon rubbed his chin. He wondered for a moment if this estate agent might be trying to play him for some sort of fool. His mother – God rest her soul – had always told Milon that he looked like the kind of idiot that people liked to take advantage of.

“Look at you in those stupid blue dungarees and that ridiculous blue hat,” she sneered at him on more than one occasion, usually when the drink was in her and she’d run out of things to throw. “You look like the kind of idiot people wouldn’t even piss on if he was on fire!”

“But mummy, you bought these clothes for me,” Milon replied.

“Of course I did!” his mother snarled. “It takes real balls to walk around town looking like that. It builds character, so it does! You mark my words!”

Milon didn’t know much about character, but these clothes had certainly gotten him beaten up a lot at school.

The estate agent grinned down at Milon. “Trust me,” he insisted. “One look at you and I could tell you were the perfect person to own this castle. All you need do is sign the contract and this place will be yours forever.”

Maybe Milon’s mother had been right after all. Maybe all those years of wedgies and wet willies had been worth it. Maybe all those years of people mocking him for his clothes and his mother telling him he was an idiot had somehow pushed Milon across some sort of internal threshold. Somehow – without even knowing it – he had gone from being the world’s biggest loser to being the world’s greatest success.

Character had been built; a backbone had been grown. And now he had a castle to prove it!

“Give me that pen!” he declared, snatching the gold-plated biro from Hudson’s hand and signing his name with all the flourish his stunted education would allow.

“Excellent!” beamed Hudson. His eyes blazed with triumph as he tore off the top copy and slipped it into his pocket. “You have no idea how happy this makes me. Now, why don’t we go inside and see what you’ve purchased?”

Milon was only too happy to agree.

Chapter 2

The first thing Milon noticed upon entering the castle was the total lack of anything resembling stairs. There were certainly a lot of things that looked like stairs – platforms and ladders and boxes piled up – but none of them actually went anywhere and they all stopped in a dead-end. It was as though the architect had suffered some sort of crazy Escher-inspired nervous breakdown while working over the plans.

But that was okay, Milon told himself as he looked around the castle’s spacious foyer. He could always just use a couple of ladders to get to the castle’s higher floors and, as Hudson kept informing him in his smooth salesman banter, having no stairs would be a huge advantage on the day that a rampaging army decided to invade.

“Is that likely to happen?” Milon asked nervously. His mother had always warned Milon to stay away from rampaging armies.

“Who can say?” said Hudson. “They say it won’t snow tomorrow too, but that doesn’t stop this castle coming with a salt cellar and shovel just in case it does. It’s good to be prepared for any eventuality.”

Milon had to admit that was true.

The second thing Milon noticed was how bland everything looked. Every wall was the same unpainted red brick and there wasn’t so much as a carpet or even a couple of paintings to break up the monotony.

But that was okay, he told himself. A quick lick of paint and some refurbishment – install some central heating and put in some electricity – and the place would scrub up like a new penny.

“And, to be honest, what else did you expect?” Hudson added with a good-natured chuckle. “You bought this place for \$10 – of course it’s going to need some work!”

Then there was the problem of the castle’s interior, which looked as though it had been designed by a four-year old child with ADHD and access to a nearly unlimited budget. Random platforms filled every room, along with doors that went nowhere, ledges that seemed to be suspended magically in the air and more keys lying around than Milon could ever imagine finding a use for.

Of chairs or tables, or any form of useable furniture whatsoever, there was no sign.

“It’s avant-garde!” the estate agent assured him, patting Milon so hard on the head that his hat fell down over his eyes. “The previous owner liked to keep his guests surprised. Why, there are secrets hidden all over this castle! I’m sure it’ll be fun trying to find them all.”

“I dunno,” said Milon dubiously. Running around a castle with no idea of where you were supposed to be going or what you were supposed to be doing certainly didn’t sound like a fun way to spend an afternoon.

But that wasn’t the thing he was really having problems with.

The thing Milon was really having trouble dealing with was the green thing coming towards him.

The green thing was as tall as Milon. It was huge and slimy with a single gigantic eye in the middle of its body. As it squelched across the floor, it left a trail of slime in its wake. It reeked so bad, Milon had to pull his hat over his nose in order to block out the stench. Even that wasn’t enough.

“W-what is it?” he asked as he backed towards the door. Now there seemed to be dozens of the things lurking in the darkness of the room, their stench the only indication that they were there.

Hudson gave the green thing a half-second glance and looked away, unconcerned. “I believe that would be a monster,” he said. He examined the back of his fingernails idly.

The green monster continued to squelch nearer.

“A m-monster?” Milon squeaked. “You never said anything about m-m-monsters!”

The estate agent shrugged. “I never told you about the tap that keeps dripping in the second story bathroom either, or the fact that there’s a dead pigeon in the well that’ll need removing before you can drink the water. The door to the basement needs new hinges and the windows in the Eastern tower let in a terrible draught. But they’re just teething problems, son – every property has them!”

The green monster continued to squelch nearer, its single eye gazing unblinking at Milon. As it neared, Milon was aware of a gaping hole below its eye that could only be a mouth. Green slime dripped from its toothless maw and Milon realised rather belatedly that he had just pissed his pants.

His mother – god rest her soul – would have killed him for that. She always did hate doing the laundry.

“B-but I can’t live in a place with m-monsters!” Milon stuttered.

The estate agent smirked at him. “Then if I were you, I’d do something about them.”

“Like what?” Milon squealed. “I can’t do anything!”

“Tell you what,” said Hudson, rubbing his beard in thought. Only then did he seem to notice the monster coming towards them and he stared down at it, like a botanist studying some new specimen. “Since I’m a nice guy and this is clearly your first property, I’ll throw you a bone.”

With that, Hudson knelt down and undid the clasps of his briefcase. From within he withdrew a small gun-like object that looked like some kind of child’s toy. It was made entirely out of red plastic and it had a bottle filled of some sort of liquid screwed into the bottom. Hudson sighted carefully down its barrel.

“Watch and learn,” he said.

As Milon watched, several bubbles floated gently out the end of the gun and sailed harmlessly over the monster’s head.

“Damn it!” Hudson cried. He shook the gun angrily. “God damned piece of Chinese...oh wait, here we go.”

This time he made sure to point the gun lower, and when he pulled the trigger a jet of bubbles hit the monster squarely, bursting soundlessly against its side.

The monster stopped dead in its tracks. It gaped up at Hudson, its single eye rolling up to stare at him as though utterly baffled by what had just happened.

At first Milon wasn’t sure what was happening either, but then he started to hear something. A strange kind of high-pitched fizzing noise like the sound a hot frying pan makes when you spill water on it. The monster’s skin was boiling away, and the goo inside it splattered across the floor like pus being slowly squeezed from a giant spot.

In less than a minute, there was nothing left of the monster except a smoking puddle of green slime and a single round eye staring up at Milon in shock.

Calmly - as though it were the most natural thing in the world - Hudson stepped forwards and crushed the eye under his foot.

“Behold,” he said, grinning. He turned towards Milon, brandishing the toy gun like a trophy. “I give you the key to liberating your castle.”

“A water pistol?” Milon squeaked. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that. His mother – God rest her soul – had always told Milon to stay away from firearms.

“Think of it as pest control,” Hudson corrected.

Milon took the toy gun reverently. “What did you do to the monster?” he asked.

“I cleaned it! I’ll let you in on a little secret. These monsters are the product of a mad science experiment gone terribly wrong. There is nothing natural in their creation. These things are made up of nothing more than raw sewage and industrial waste.”

“Industrial waste?” Milon squeaked.

Hudson nodded sadly. “Alas, the scientist who created them was trying to find a new way of recycling rubbish. He succeeded. The truth is, there’s a reason this castle is a secret. These monsters must be kept away from the rest of humanity. They are dangerous and they breed like rabbits. Normal bullets go right through them. Try cutting them or squashing them and they just reform like new. They don’t burn. They can’t be starved out. Trust me, we’ve tried all of these things and they never worked. But they really hate being clean. That plastic bubble gun there...it’s our only hope!”

Their only hope...

“You are our only hope.”

Milon stared down at the gun, utterly speechless.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you all of this sooner but I didn’t think you would agree unless this castle was already in your name. But it’s yours now. Your castle. A quick spit and polish – a few well-fired bubbles from that gun – and these monsters will be gone in no time at all. Then this castle will be yours to enjoy at your leisure for the rest of your life.”

Milon tested the gun’s trigger and watched as a handful of bubbles floated away into the distance. He had to admit, as a weapon it looked pretty useless, but then again his mother – God rest her soul – had always told Milon never to judge something by first impressions alone. “That’s what I did when I married your father,” she confessed one time when she was bed-ridden with one of her hangovers. “Don’t you ever go making the same mistake!”

“I won’t, mummy!” Milon had promised. “I promise I won’t ever marry my dad.”

Killing monsters – was he really capable of such a thing? Owning a castle and fixing it up were pretty extreme things for him to do, but killing?

His mother’s words echoed in his head. “You just want to make things easy for yourself!” He could only imagine what she would say if she could see him now. She would have said Milon was getting ideas above his station. She would have said he was getting too big for his boots and Milon had always been such a little guy.

He sighed. Maybe this castle wasn’t for him, after all.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn’t even notice Hudson until the estate agent was crouching down next to him, a fatherly arm wrapping around Milon’s shoulder and a concerned look on his face.

“Listen, son,” he said with another sparkle of his teeth. “I can see you’re having some doubts about this place, but you mustn’t give up! I’ve been an estate agent for as long as I can remember, and trust me – when you’ve been in the game as long as I have, you start to get an instinct for

when a place is right for someone and when it's not. And this place is right for you! The moment I laid eyes on you, I knew that here was the guy who was destined to own this castle! Why, I can just picture you now, sitting back in one of the tower libraries, a roaring log fire beside you, a glass of brandy in hand..."

"I'm not allowed to drink alcohol," Milon sniffed.

"Milk then."

"I'm lactose intolerant."

"Fruit juice?" When Milon glumly nodded he continued. "Yes, fruit juice! That's exactly what I see! You, the tower, a log fire and fruit juice. A castle full of wonders to call your own! And all you need to do is kill a few monsters first. How hard can it be?"

Milon tried to imagine himself just as Hudson had described.

"I've never had fruit juice before," he confessed. "My mother was always suspicious of fruit. She said it would rot my teeth."

"Ah, but your mother never owned a castle, did she?"

Milon had to admit that was true.

"Well, there you are then! In this place, you can set your own rules!"

Milon considered it. Him, the master of this place. Little Milon, the stunted dweeb who everyone at school – even the teachers – used to beat up for his lunch money.

He squeezed the trigger again and a single bubble floated out the gun and popped with a sizzle against Hudson's face.

"Stop that!" said Hudson, annoyed, but Milon found himself grinning all the same.

All he had to do was kill a few monsters! This was going to be easy! "I'll do it!" he piped, and Hudson chuckled as he got to his feet, wiping soap residue from his face with the back of his sleeve.

"Attaboy! Just one last thing. Make sure you kill every single monster, you hear? Don't leave any of them alive – not one!"

"No worries!" said Milon. For the first time since setting foot inside this castle, he felt certain he was up to the challenge. Bring it on, monsters! He peered out into the darkness in front of him as though daring it to attack.

He had work to do.

Chapter 3

Milon's first priority was to clear out the castle's lower rooms. Hudson wasn't kidding when he said the place was infested with monsters; there were more green slimy things living in this place than Milon had learned the names of numbers for.

He hadn't seen so much green slime in one place since that time he'd explored the contents of his nose during allergy season, but the monsters were surprisingly easy to kill all the same. Just as Hudson had demonstrated, a single burst of bubbles and they were sizzling away to nothing within moments of him firing his gun.

The lower rooms of the castle were quickly gaining a sticky coating of smouldering green slime. Milon would have to remember to bring a mop with him the next time he passed through this way.

Systematically, he cleared the rooms one by one of monsters. First the foyer, then the kitchens, followed by the gallery and the music room, the games room and atrium.

In the armoury he caught two of the beasts gorging themselves fat on what remained of an old rusty pitchfork. In the parlour he discovered one particularly large specimen stuffing itself with the remains of an old wooden shelf. Splinters of wood jutted out from the slime of its body like quills on a porcupine, and when Milon shot it, the monster actually creaked as the wood inside of it clattered to the ground.

"At least that explains what happened to all the furniture," Milon said. "The monsters must have eaten it all!"

Taking a small nail from his pocket, Milon marked an 'X' on the door so he would remember he'd already been this way. There were so many rooms in this castle, if he didn't make some sort of organised plan of things, he would quickly lose track of where he had been and where he still needed to go. There were rooms in this castle he was fairly sure no one had been inside for years and more secrets than he could count (although considering he'd never learned to count beyond his fingers, that really wasn't so hard).

What's more, he'd quickly discovered that some of the walls in the castle dissolved when he fired his bubble gun at them. At first he'd been horrified when a misfired shot resulted in half the wall disappearing but he quickly discovered that this was actually the only way to progress

deeper into the castle and that it didn't actually matter, since the damaged walls just respawned every time he left the room.

There were all sorts of treasures hidden in the castle walls. Sometimes there was money hiding back there, sometimes keys and, on one occasion, he found a hidden doorway which led to a small shop that only stocked one item: a pair of Spring Shoes that allowed him to jump really high.

After a few hours of this, Milon found himself with pockets bulging with cash and little 'X's marked onto so many of the castle walls, it was starting to look like some sort of cheap sex parlour. And Milon should know; his mother used to run one after all.

"This castle's paid for itself a thousand times over!" he chortled as he fired his bubble gun at a likely looking spot on the wall and was rewarded with a bag full of cash for his troubles.

Why, he could sell this place tomorrow and live off the profits forever! Even if he never slept a single night in this place, it had already made him a fortune.

"Who's the sucker now?" he squeaked, his high-pitched laughter echoing off the walls. "Who's the good for nothing idiot now, huh? Hahahahaha!"

"Rrrraawwwwooo!"

An answering roar shook the air. The laughter died in Milon's throat.

"Rrrraawwwwooo! Rrrraaaarrrr!"

It was a horrible sound – a hate-filled, booming sound that bounced off the walls and shook plaster from the ceiling. It was one of those sounds that seemed to have no source and yet, now that Milon was looking for it, he thought he could make out something moving in the furthest corner of the room. He hadn't explored that way yet, but he already had a pretty good idea of what he was about to find there.

Something scaly. Something massive.

Another roar and a jet of flame shot through the darkness, illuminating a pair of huge, scaled wings and a mouth full of dagger-sharp teeth. Milon caught a glimpse of bones piled up around the creature's side. Of thick, soot-blackened chains and inhuman, slitted eyes. Its tail was long. Its claws were sharp.

It was a dragon.

Milon fell back against the wall, panting and terrified. His bubble gun trembled in his grip but it was already painfully obvious that there was no way in hell it was going to be of any help against a creature that size.

Another roar shook the room. Was it hot in here, or was he just terrified? His forehead dripped with sweat all the same.

Fortunately, the monster hadn't seen him yet.

"If I can just sneak up behind the dragon and unleash a few blasts at it..." Milon mused.

It was a gigantic creature, but he was fairly sure that if he could just get one good shot at its weak point (all monsters had a weak point, right?) then he could...

Milon slapped his head. "What are you talking about, Milon? That's a dragon there, that is!"

As if in answer, the dragon lifted its head back and unleashed another curling jet of flame into the air.

"Bloody hell!" Milon squeaked. For once he was glad that his mother – God rest her soul – wasn't around to hear him swearing like that. "I'm in way over my head here."

Slowly, on tip-toes so as to not attract attention, Milon turned back the way he had come and crept towards the door.

The dragon's roars shook the room at every other step. They were so loud, he was sure the monster must have spotted him at least half a dozen times, but every time he dared to look around, the dragon was still hunched brooding in its corner, smoke trailing from the end of its snout as it peered blindly around the room.

As soon as Milon was on the threshold of the door, he tumbled through it, slamming the door so hard behind himself that the plaster cracked around the doorframe and he didn't even need a little 'X' to tell him where he'd just been.

The dragon's roars echoed in his ears as he fled down the hallway and out through the castle's main doors. He ran until he was well outside the castle, sprinting across the grounds as fast as his stumpy little legs could carry him. His heart fluttered so fast in his chest he was sure he was about to keel over with a heart attack. He had to grab his hat to stop it flying off his head.

He found Hudson half-way across the drawbridge.

The estate agent, he was surprised to see, had set up a little temporary office for himself. He sat behind a collapsible camping table, his briefcase open before him and his golden pen in hand.

He looked up as Milon approached and seemed genuinely surprised to see him. "You're finished already?" he asked, frowning at Milon's disheveled appearance.

"Something big!" Milon wheezed. "Something...huge! A dragon! I think it's a dragon!"

"Oh that," said Hudson. He turned back to his Filofax and continued marking off dates in it. "Yes, I was wondering when you'd come across Colin."

“So you knew about this?” Milon cried. “You left me in there with that...thing and never thought I should know?”

Hudson sighed. It wasn’t a loud sigh, but Milon recognised it all the same. It was the sort of sigh that had followed Milon throughout his entire life. It was the sigh of the truly exasperated. The sigh of a man at the end of his tether. It was the sort of sigh that everyone seemed to make after spending enough time in Milon’s company.

Hudson shuffled his papers together and closed his briefcase with a snap. He looked up at Milon (though “up,” of course, was a figurative term, since even sitting down the estate agent was taller).

“Surely you’d have realised by now that I’ve only got your best interests at heart, Milon?” he said. “Surely I’ve proved to you time and again that I’m on your side? I sold you this castle. I gave you the bubble gun. I walked you through the grounds. You’re going to have to learn to trust me, son.”

Milon felt himself burn red. Guiltily he stepped back from the table and looked down at his toes. “I just don’t see why you didn’t tell me about the dragon...” he said. He had to admit, it sounded like a pretty feeble complaint now that he was saying it out loud.

“I’m sorry I never told you about the dragon,” said Hudson. “I’m a very busy man, you understand. I have a lot of castles to sell. Some of them have dragons; some of them don’t. I guess I just got my castles confused. But you’re not hurt, are you?”

Milon shook his head.

“The dragon didn’t attack you or in any way damage the castle?”

Milon had to admit that it hadn’t.

“Well, there you are then!” the estate agent beamed. “Listen, I know exactly what you can do about this. Remember how I told you earlier that the monsters in that castle were created by a mad scientist?”

“I guess,” said Milon, though, in all honesty, he would have had trouble remembering his own name if his mother – God rest her soul – hadn’t stitched it inside his underwear.

“Well, he lives right here on the castle grounds. His name’s Professor Von Staten. The previous owner of this castle let the Professor stay here and conduct his scientific experiments in exchange for a few favours. I’m sure that if you go to him and tell him that you’re the current owner of the castle and you’re trying to fix it up, he’ll build you some sort of dragon-killing device in no time!”

“Thanks!” said Milon cheerfully. He had to admit, despite his little moment of doubt just then, this estate agent really was a very friendly chap.

“Don’t mention it,” said Hudson dismissively. “Now get out of here and don’t come back until that dragon and every other monster in that castle is dead, you hear?”

Milon heard. If there was one thing Milon was very good at doing it was hearing what people bigger than him were saying. He’d had a whole lifetime of practice.

Chapter 4

Professor Von Staten's laboratory looked less like an institute of science than a giant steel bunker half-buried in the ground. It hunkered against the side of the hill, looking for all the world like the type of thing a survivalist might build in his back yard in case of nuclear winter. Its front door was like a submarine hatch bolted onto the side, its windows mere slits to let in some air. A single chimney released puffs of pale blue smoke.

The bronze plaque bolted to the wall next to the doorway said "Professor Alfred P. Von Staten" in large embossed letters, followed by a bunch of other letters that Milon assumed was meant to be a list of his qualifications.

A small bell cord hung above the plaque. Nervously, Milon reached up for it. The door flew suddenly open.

"Ah-ha!" A skinny old man stood in the doorway, staring down at him through what had to be the thickest pair of glasses Milon had ever seen. "Thought you could sneak off, did you?"

He looked like every stereotype of a mad scientist Milon had ever seen, all thrown into a blender and left to fester for a while. His hair was tufted and white, his nose long and crooked. Milon was shocked to discover that beneath his white lab coat, the man was naked except for a pair of blue polka dot boxer shorts and a single grey sock with a hole in the toe.

If this man wasn't a Professor of some sort then Milon wasn't the owner of a castle. And he was! Definitely. He had a contract that told him so and everything.

"Thought you could crawl back in here without me noticing, did you?" The shrill voice carried just enough of a vaguely European accent to guarantee he would never be taken seriously. "Thought you could just waltz back in here with your la-di-dah and your shenanigans and old Professor Von Staten wouldn't know the difference, did you?"

"Uh..." Milon had been about to ask, "Excuse me but are you Professor Von Staten?" but since the Professor had already kindly introduced himself, he quickly changed his question to a much more reasonable, "I'm sorry?"

"You'd better be!" Von Staten shrieked. "Get in here!"

Grabbing Milon by the back of his dungarees, the Professor dragged him inside and slammed the bunker shut behind him.

Milon had less than a millisecond to acclimatise himself before the Professor was stuffing things into his arms. "Towels," he said, naming the items as he threw them at him. "Bed sheets. Lab coats. Whites: 40 degrees. One hour and then leave them to air dry. And if you even think of spilling anything on them..."

The Professor jabbed a finger at Milon. Milon felt himself going cross-eyed as he stared at the tip.

"I think there's been some mistake, sir," said Milon.

"I'll say! A mistake I ever hired you is what! How long's it been now, Jimmy? Ten years since you snuck off in the middle of the night! You've got some serious overtime to put in, young man."

"No, but you see, my name's Milon..."

"Stupid youth with his stupid shenanigans!"

"I'm the owner of the castle!"

"All lies and la-di-dah and nonsense."

"I've got a contract..." He tried to pull it out of his pocket to show it to the Professor but there was so much stuff in his arms he just tumbled over in a heap on the floor, dirty bed sheets tangled round his legs and a damp towel draped across his head.

"Damnation, Jimmy! Can't you see I'm busy here?"

As far as Milon could tell, the only thing the Professor was busy with was shouting at him, but he thought it best not to mention that. Instead, he found himself staring open-mouthed at the room around him as he looked at it properly for the first time.

Everywhere Milon looked there were strange things happening. Test tubes bubbled and smoked with colourful substances. Metal cylinders sparked and crackled with electricity. What looked like a severed foot sat twitching in the bottom of a tank full of greenish liquid, alongside a large octopus and what had to be the Professor's other sock. There was a smell to the place like rotten eggs. The very air seemed to hum with static electricity.

But the really weird thing was what was sitting in the middle of the table dominating the centre of the room. It was a large box-like device with bits of wire coiling out the top of it and various gears clicking around inside.

Blueprints were scattered on the table around it, their corners weighed down with empty test tubes and the remains of the Professor's last meal.

"What are you working on, Professor?" Milon asked, too curious to stay quiet.

To his surprise, the Professor beamed at him. "I'm glad you asked, Jimmy. Here, take a look at this!" The Professor grabbed a newspaper from the sideboard and thrust it into Milon's hands.

"Read!" he commanded.

Milon had never quite got his head around the whole concept of reading things but fortunately this particular newspaper was a British tabloid and so he had no trouble with it.

"World emerges triumphant from recent terror attack," he read. "Mad Scientist Professor Von Staten (73)'s latest attempt to take over the world was foiled last night by an old age pensioner from Ipswich. Mr. Hughes (81) of Glastonbury Avenue said, 'I gave that young whippersnapper a taste of what-for, let me tell you! He won't be trying his luck on me again anytime soon.'" Milon lowered the newspaper. "Latest attempt to take over the world?"

"Bah!" Von Staten scoffed. "Damn spin doctors and their bias! They just can't see the bigger picture! This foiled attempt was merely a distraction, designed to fool those idiots into thinking I was defeated while I secretly prepared my main blow."

Milon continued to read. "The Professor's latest plan involved firing a laser at the moon in order to push it away from the Earth's orbit. If successful, the resulting loss of tidal forces would have resulted in a series of worldwide catastrophes that would have spelled the end of all life on Earth. Oh my God, Professor!"

Von Staten shrugged. "I've got my bunker; I'd have been fine."

"So what did this man from Ipswich do?" Milon asked.

"He got lucky is what," growled Von Staten. "But this time I will have the last laugh. Behold!" He indicated the strange device in the middle of the table. "The crowning triumph of my genius! With this, I will finally be able to conquer the world. And this time no one from Ipswich will be able to stop me!"

"Wow!" said Milon as he looked at the box. He was, admittedly, easily impressed, but even so he felt like the word was appropriate. Carefully, Milon untangled himself from the pile of laundry and picked his way over to the table. He stared up at the strange metal box with its gears and pistons whirring away inside. "What is it?"

"A Future Teleportation Device!" the Professor declared. "With the power of this device, I can burrow a fourth dimensional wormhole into whatever point in space-time I choose, and then bring back to the present any physical object! Think about the possibilities, Jimmy! I could teleport back to our time weapons that haven't been invented yet! I could teleport people who haven't been born and utilise their knowledge of future events! I could teleport gold that hasn't been mined yet and sell it on the current market for a fortune! By garnering together the powers of

the cosmos I, Professor Von Staten, will finally make the world tremble at the sound of my name! I will cast a blazing fireball of destruction across the entire sky! Bwahahahahaha!”

Milon fell back in shock. Unfortunately, the only thing behind him was the pile of dirty laundry, and he found himself once more tangled up in bed sheets as the mad scientist cackled with laughter.

“My God!” said Milon. “You’re mad!”

“Mad?” cried Von Staten. “Perhaps. Your God? Quite possibly. But rest assured, Jimmy, I will not destroy everything in this world. If I did, there wouldn’t be any future to teleport things back from, would there? No...I’m pretty sure I could find the heart to spare one or two...hundred women. Good looking ones.”

The Professor ran a hand through his tufted hair and grinned absent-mindedly at the thought. Whether it was the idea of the world being at his mercy or the prospect of sleeping with two hundred women that made the Professor so happy, Milon couldn’t tell, but he had the sneaking suspicion the Professor acted pretty much the same around both.

“Behold my genius!” the Professor cried as he turned back to the machine, his finger hovering over the start button.

“Wait, Professor!” Milon cried, thinking as quickly as his little blue-hatted head would allow. His mother – God rest her soul – had always warned Milon not to think too quickly. It was bad for the digestion, she had always insisted. “I saw it once on *Oprah*.”

But Milon was fairly sure that if he didn’t say something pretty soon the whole world – not to mention his secret castle – would soon be lying in ruins.

“Maybe you should, uh, test it first?” he suggested. “You know, make sure it works properly and all that?”

Von Staten turned to regard Milon with cold, calculating eyes.

“Test it?” he said.

“Uh, yes.”

“Test an experiment before conducting it. What an intriguing idea.”

“That’s right,” said Milon as he finished untangling himself from the bed sheets. He grabbed the newspaper from off the floor and showed it to the Professor. “You could test the machine on this newspaper, for example. Where did you buy it from?”

“Why, the gift shop of course,” said Von Staten. “Every castle has a gift shop.”

“That’s true,” said Milon. “So why don’t you set the co-ordinates of this future teleportation device...”

“Future Teleportation Device,” the Professor corrected.

“...to tomorrow morning in the gift shop? If you can teleport tomorrow’s newspaper to today, then we’ll know that it works for sure!”

Professor Von Staten peered down at Milon as though seeing him for the first time. *Good*, thought Milon. *Maybe he’ll stop calling me Jimmy now.*

“You know, Jimmy,” he mused. “There are times that I almost don’t regret bringing you back from the dead. Test an invention to see if it works...how do you come up with such ideas?”

“I like to think outside the box, Professor,” said Milon.

“Indeed?” mused the Professor. “I, too, do most of my thinking while not in a box. Perhaps you and I are more alike than I initially thought.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Very well.” The Professor turned back to the Future Teleportation Device and began flicking switches on its side. The gears started whirring more quickly and sparks fizzled at the end of its wires. “Setting co-ordinates for tomorrow...the castle’s gift shop. Behold!”

There was a bright flash of light, the smell of ozone, and suddenly a newspaper was sitting in the middle of the desk, its surface covered in a thin layer of hoar-frost.

“Success!” Professor Von Staten punched the air and did a little jig in his boxer shorts. “Quick, Jimmy, read what it says!”

Milon took the paper and stared down at the front page. Sure enough it was a copy of the next day’s newspaper. The date was correct and the stories were all about things that Milon was fairly sure hadn’t happened yet. On the front cover there was a story about some castle no one had ever heard of blowing up for some reason. And on the next page...

“Here it is Professor,” Milon said, showing Von Staten the article. “Foiled once again. Insane Professor Von Staten (79)’s latest plan to take over the world by use of a future teleportation device yet again ended in failure last night. ‘At this point, he’s the laughing stock of the whole world,’ said one observer from Ipswich who chose to remain anonymous. ‘Everything he tries always ends in failure. This teleportation device of his clearly doesn’t work.’ Professor Von Staten himself was unavailable for comment.”

“What?!” cried Von Staten as he snatched the paper from Milon’s hands. He scowled down at the print and then looked up at the device which still whirred away on the table. “But...I could have sworn I just saw this thing working perfectly!”

“So did I Professor,” said Milon. “But it’s in the newspaper.”

“Indeed,” said the Professor with a frown.

“They can’t just write anything they want in a newspaper,” said Milon. “That would be libel.” He knew that because his mother – God rest her soul – had once been arrested for exactly that. She had tried paying the local newspaper to write a story saying that Milon wasn’t actually her son, but was in fact the spawn of Satan and then use that evidence in court to have him legally euthanised. The courts, however, declared that although Milon was clearly a special child, there wasn’t enough evidence to back up her claim.

Professor Von Staten was waving his arms above his head in frustration as he cantered around the laboratory. “But it was working perfectly!” he screamed. “I did all the calculations correctly! Eight months of work down the toilet! All for nothing!”

“Uh, Professor, there is something else in here about you,” said Milon. As he turned a page, he was slightly surprised to see a picture of himself staring sheepishly up at the camera. Next to him was what looked like a dead dragon.

“What?”

“It says that you managed to build some sort of Dragon-Killing Death Ray.”

“What??”

“And that you used it to kill a dragon. The article says it was possibly the only dragon left in the whole world.”

“What nonsense are you raving on about now boy...?”

“It accuses you of deliberately killing a crit-i-ca-lly en-dan-ger-ed species. Wow, that’s a hard word to read. They’re worried you’re planning to use the same technique to carry out some sort of genocide.”

“Genocide!” cried Von Staten as he leapt around the table and snatched the newspaper once more from Milon’s hands. “That sounds more like my area of specialisation! But where on Earth could I find a dragon between now and tomorrow? And why would I want to kill it?”

Even Milon could recognise so obvious an opening. “There’s one inside the castle!” he squeaked.

“You mean Colin?” said the Professor. “No. I would never kill him.”

“But that’s the only dragon I’ve ever seen. It must be the one the newspaper’s talking about!”

“Hmmm,” said the Professor as he looked down at the article. “I can’t for the life of me see why I would want to kill that dragon – especially with that bastard Hudson sniffing around. But, still, if it’s in a newspaper...they can’t just print lies, you know.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Milon.

“Hmm. Well, as it happens, killing a dragon is a remarkably simple thing to do. In fact, I can knock together a device to kill one in no time at all!”

“Oh great!” squeaked Milon.

“Yes. Unfortunately, in order to build such a device, I’m going to need some Red Goo.”

Milon felt the smile vanish from his face as quickly as it had appeared. “Red Goo?” he repeated. He suddenly had that horrible feeling in his stomach that he was about to be sent on a fetch quest.

“Oh yes!” said the Professor. “You can’t kill a dragon without Red Goo! Unfortunately, I just used up the last of my supply by building this apparently non-functioning Future Teleportation Device.” He scowled suspiciously down at the device but it just continued to putter away at him. “Nonchalant bastard,” he said.

“Is there anywhere I can find more of this Red Goo?” asked Milon, desperately.

The Professor considered it. “You know, I think there might be some hidden away inside the castle. Down in the old wine cellar. There’s a stockroom there, filled with glass vials. I think the Red Goo is among them. You’ll need to be careful, though. It’s pitch black down in that cellar, and there are no windows to let in any light. You’ll have to watch your step very carefully.”

“Maybe I could just take a torch with me?” Milon asked hopefully. The Professor just clipped him around the ear.

“Do you think I’m made of money?” he wailed. “You’re walking on thin ice as it is, little Jimmy. If you think I’m about to give you a torch so you can go swanning off with it all la-di-dah and shenanigans and whatnot and I won’t see you again for 10 years, you’ve got another thing coming! Go get the Red Goo. We can talk about your payment afterwards.”

Milon gathered up the pile of laundry and the copy of tomorrow’s newspaper and left the laboratory as quickly as he could.

On his way back to the castle, he stopped briefly by the gift shop and bought himself a nice key ring with some of the money he’d found. It would make a nice souvenir. He also bought himself a flame retardant suit, which he guessed would come in handy against the dragon.

While he was there, he handed the copy of tomorrow’s newspaper to the clerk. “There’s no point in throwing it out,” he explained when the clerk just blinked at him, confused. “Just put it on the shelf and you can sell it tomorrow with the others.”

He left the gift shop at a cheerful skip, leaving the clerk standing on the threshold, staring after him with a puzzled expression. Not once

during the entire trip back to the castle did Milon try to get his head around the monumental time paradox he had just created.

And, in all honesty, he was much better off for that.

Chapter 5

The basement was just as dark and foreboding as Professor Von Staten had warned it would be. To get to it, Milon had to climb down some of the steepest, most rickety steps he had ever seen and pass through a door whose front was plastered with warning signs like “Keep Out!” “Beware of bottomless pits!” and, most ominously, “Sudden Death Ahead!”

Fortunately, Milon had never quite got his head around the whole concept of reading, so he happily ignored them all.

“I have to get that Red Goo,” he told himself as he inched the door open and peered into the darkness beyond.

He fired off a few shots into the black and, when there was no answering sizzle, pushed his way fully into the room. He spent the next few minutes creeping semi-blind through darkness in an awkward kind of half-shuffle. Every step, he fired off a few shots from his bubble gun and waited to be sure there was nothing out there. After a few minutes of this, there were so many bubbles floating around in the dark, the cellar was starting to smell like the inside of a laundry room.

Not that Milon knew what a laundry room smelled like. His mother – God rest her soul – had always forbidden Milon from going into theirs as she always claimed it would over-excite him. To be fair, even Milon’s mother had rarely gone inside theirs.

“Focus, Milon,” he told himself, firing off another stream of bubbles. “You’re almost there now...”

Step. Fire. Step. Fire. He inched his way through the darkness.

Step. Fire. Step. Fire. He followed the wall so he wouldn’t get lost.

Step. Fire. Step. Fire...

It all happened in a flash. Maybe the floorboards were just really old, or maybe all the bubbles Milon was firing had weakened them in some way, but either way the next thing he knew, the floor was giving out beneath his feet and he was cartwheeling through the air, tumbling to the ground in a messy crush of limbs and bubbles and rotten wood. His foot was pinned painfully under his backside as he landed, and his head cracked hard against the wall. He would have cried out if he hadn’t been so busy coughing from all the dust that was suddenly flying into his face.

He sneezed.

“Bless you!” said a voice from the darkness around him.

“Thanks,” said Milon miserably. Then he felt himself go cold. “W-wait a sec. Who’s that?”

He heard the answer before he smelled it: a squelching, flatulent noise, not unlike that a slug might make if you tried to French kiss it. He smelled the answer before he saw it: a rotten garbage stink that reminded Milon of something that had crawled up inside someone’s rectum and died.

A monster, here in the room with him.

A monster, coming towards him.

“Stay back!” Milon shouted at the darkness. He scrambled for his bubble gun and waved it blindly, but in the darkness of the cellar he couldn’t see more than a foot in front of his face, and every inch of that foot was spinning.

He tried to pull himself upright but his twisted ankle hurt so badly that he barely managed to shift in place. When he lifted his head it felt wet and sticky behind him and he had trouble working out which way was up. He slid back down the wall, muttering curses. His mother – God rest her soul – would have locked him in the coal shed for a week if she’d heard him speaking like that.

“I’m armed!” Milon told the darkness. “Stay back or I’ll shoot!”

To his surprise, the monster obeyed him. “I’m not going to hurt you!” the voice pleaded from the darkness. It was a deep, calm voice, a voice that sounded full of wisdom. It was strangely soothing.

Slowly, by degrees, Milon started to pick out details from the gloom. A single round eye, as huge as Milon’s head. A shapeless blob-like body with a huge gaping mouth. Maybe it was just his imagination, or maybe his eyes were finally adjusting to the dim light, but Milon could have sworn it was getting brighter around here. Not bright, exactly, but there was light enough for him to see his own twisted, bruised body laid out before him like a piece of meat in a butcher’s shop. Light enough for him to see the monster pooling in front of him.

And it was the strangest thing...maybe Milon had hit his head much harder than he realised, but he could have sworn the light was coming from the monster’s body.

The monster’s red body.

Milon worked his mouth silently in the darkness. “You’re a m-monster,” he managed at last. “A m-monster that can talk.”

“Very observant,” the monster agreed. “And you’re a...boy of some kind? An elf, maybe? Some sort of company mascot?”

“A nuisance,” Milon suggested. It was what his mother had always called him, after all, and she must have known what she was talking about. She’d had him tested and everything.

“A nuisance,” the monster agreed. “I’ve been watching you from down here, little nuisance. You’ve certainly killed a lot of monsters with that toy gun of yours. I wonder if you realise why.”

“They’re infesting the castle,” Milon defended. Vaguely, in the back of his mind, he was aware of how strange this situation really was. Had he been out in the daylight and able to clearly see exactly what he was talking to and how close to it he was, he probably would have been terrified. Here in the darkness of the basement, however, lying back on a bed of splintered wood, it felt strangely natural. Intimate, almost.

The monster’s eye never blinked as it peered down at Milon’s head. Its body faintly glowed.

“This is my castle,” Milon added helpfully.

“For now,” the monster said. “You know, these creatures you’ve been killing were born in this place. They know nothing of the outside world; they’ve spent their whole lives within these castle walls. Isn’t this, then, their home as well?”

The monster squelched a little nearer and Milon quickly raised his gun. “Not an inch closer!” he commanded. “You’ve seen what this gun can do!”

“I have,” said the monster sadly. “A terrible way to die...”

“I’ll use it on you!”

“I have no doubt of it. Even though I have already told you that I won’t hurt you. Such lack of trust.”

“You could be lying to me! You’re a monster, after all.”

“Lying?” Milon had the impression that if the monster had a neck, it would have shaken its head sadly at that. Instead, all it did was jiggle a little. “Have you ever known a monster to tell a lie?”

Milon had to admit that he hadn’t.

“But, you see, I have to kill you all,” Milon said apologetically. He tried moving again but the pain in his foot had him gasping in pain. He was pretty sure something was broken down there. “I have a contract that says I have to clear this place of monsters!”

“A contract to kill things. How sad. That makes you what? A hit man of sorts?” The monster jiggled a bit more.

“I don’t want to do it!” Milon protested weakly.

“All the worse for you,” said the monster. “Let’s be real here: you’re injured, but armed. And I’m close enough that I could easily kill you before that bubble gun of yours took effect. We’re at an impasse, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess,” said Milon, who had no idea what an impasse was but didn’t like the sound of it all the same.

“Be honest: you didn’t come down here to kill me, did you?”

“No,” Milon admitted.

“You came down here for the Red Goo.”

“You know about it?” Milon said, so surprised that he momentarily forgot about the pain in his foot. He pulled himself upright a little more, glancing around as though half-expecting to find the Red Goo suddenly lying right next to him on the floor.

“It’s a powerful potion,” the monster told him. “I remember the day, years ago, when I first stumbled upon a vial of the stuff right here in the darkness of this room. I was just a mindless blob back then – industrial effluent held together with little more than glue and black magic. Just a great big eyeball with an insatiable appetite. I had no idea what I was eating until it was already halfway down my gullet. But that Red Goo changed me.”

The monster turned away and its huge eye grew misty as though it were deep in memory.

“Such pain...” he continued. “I never thought I would experience such horrible agony. I had no idea what was happening to me. But when it was all over – days or weeks after it began, who can tell – I realised that I was able to realise things. I had somehow developed sentience. A brain. The power of human speech. It’s thanks to that Red Goo that I gained the intelligence to understand exactly what you’re doing here, and just how perilous your situation is. I can help you, little Milon. I can help you defeat the dragon and make this castle your own. But, in exchange, I ask for one thing.”

“Money?” Milon guessed.

“My life,” he corrected. “I offer you this bargain, little nuisance, and I hope you will heed it well. Let me live down here in this cellar unmolested. I promise, it’ll be our little secret. I will live down here, undisturbed, and you will have the rest of the castle for yourself. How does that sound?”

Milon considered his position carefully. Surely Hudson wouldn’t complain about one little monster being left alive? What he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, and Milon wasn’t sure how he felt about killing something that he’d just had such a long conversation with. “I won’t be able to feed you anything,” he said reluctantly.

“I can take care of myself,” the monster assured him.

“And I should probably charge rent.”

“I’ve got money hidden away in the walls of the castle. No one will find it.”

Hard to believe he was actually considering this. If someone had told Milon just a few hours ago that he would soon be doing deals with a monster in the basement of a castle he’d bought for \$10 then he would have said that that person was crazy. Not loudly of course – more of a muttered under-the-breath sort of accusation. Milon knew from years of

experience that it was best not to speak his mind around those who were bigger than him.

“Just tell me two things,” Milon said.

“Anything,” said the monster.

“Where did all you monsters come from? My estate agent said they were created by a scientist?”

“Ah,” said the monster. “Yes.” It squelched a short distance away from Milon, its gaping mouth hanging partway open as though it were trying to remember something it would rather forget. “There is a scientist who lives on the castle grounds. A man named Professor Von Staten.”

“I know him!” Milon said cheerfully.

“Yes. He didn’t used to live here – this castle was the property of another man – but he was looking for somewhere secret where he could conduct his evil experiments. He found this place and asked the owner if he could live here. The owner said no. Well, the Professor wasn’t happy with that answer, so he created me and all of the other monsters living in this place and unleashed us into the castle. For what purpose, I cannot say. But shortly afterwards the owner left, and the Professor has lived here ever since. As I said before, my mind was non-existent before the Red Goo came along and my memories of that time are hazy – indistinct. But I do remember being moulded. I remember being plucked from the landfill site, little more than a pile of rotting garbage. I remember this man in a white lab coat standing over us with his arms thrown out. He was laughing.

“Then...darkness. This room. As you saw, most of my brethren gorged themselves fat on what they found in this castle. The furnishings and food quickly disappeared. Some of them turned on each other. I was fortunate – or perhaps unfortunate – since I ended up down here in this basement, where the Professor stored his Red Goo. I consumed it and gained intelligence. I saw the horrors that had happened to my kind.

“Tis a miserable life,” he confessed to Milon, “knowing that your people are doomed. And, also, knowing that you are the only one with wit enough to see it. Knowing that you cannot stop their destruction and that even if you could...so what? You are the only one of your kind with intelligence. You’ll never find another to talk with, never find someone special to go for romantic squelches with. Never be able to start a family and grow old together...”

Milon blew his nose noisily on his cap. “I had no idea,” he confessed. “Why would the Professor treat you like that?”

“You’d better ask him,” the monster said. “But anyway, now you know. I believe there was a second thing you wanted to ask?”

“Oh yes,” said Milon, who had almost forgotten. “What’s your name?”

“Balthazar,” said Balthazar. “And here, as promised, is your Red Goo.”

With that, the monster opened its gaping mouth and retched a blob of slime onto the floor. In the middle of the blob lay a vial of liquid – red liquid. Milon took it gingerly and wiped it clean on his dungarees.

“Wait a second!” he said. “Without the Red Goo, won’t you turn stupid again?”

Balthazar shrugged. Considering he had no shoulders, it was a pretty impressive thing to do.

“What need have I of intelligence?” he asked sadly. “It’s only ever caused me misery.”

“My mother used to say the same thing,” said Milon.

“You’ve promised that you won’t kill me. That’s more than enough for me,” said Balthazar. He paused. “I do have you word, don’t I?”

“You do,” Milon promised.

“Then that will be enough. And here: a small token of my friendship to you.” Before Milon could stop him, Balthazar touched Milon’s foot with a tendril of slime. Milon felt a numb coldness flow over him, followed by a prickling feeling as of a thousand needles being pressed gently into his foot.

When Balthazar pulled back, Milon was astonished to discover that his foot was perfectly healed. He jumped up onto his feet, amazed at the sudden lack of pain.

“You healed me!” Milon exclaimed. He always had liked pointing out the obvious.

“Just one of the many secrets being a puddle of chemicals will teach you,” Balthazar said with a wink, which equally could have just been a blink seeing as it only had one eye. “I should warn you, however, you might be slightly radioactive for a few weeks. I’d avoid dark places for a while if you don’t want to be freaked out by the sight of yourself glowing.”

“Will do!” Milon said, clutching the flask of Red Goo.

He left the basement the way he had come, skipping up the stairs two at a time.

“What a nice monster,” Milon said as he set off towards Professor Von Staten’s laboratory. Milon’s mother – God rest her soul – had always told Milon he was too much of a sap, but this time Milon was certain he’d done the right thing.

Chapter 6

“Excellent work!” beamed Professor Von Staten. “You’ve brought the Red Goo! However,” and here his smile turned into a stern frown, “I see you failed to bring back the laundry. Docked points on that one, Jimmy. Docked points.”

Fortunately, the Professor had more than enough dirty laundry lying around for Milon to work on while the Professor added the finishing touches to his Dragon-Killing Death Ray.

As it happened, the laundry was pretty easy to clean – a few squirts of his bubble gun and it was sparkling like an estate agent’s teeth. There certainly was a lot of it, though. By the looks of things, the good Professor lived down here as some kind of hermit, rarely going outside for more than a few minutes at a time. There were things in this bunker that hadn’t been cleaned in months. Dirty plates stacked up in the corner of his room and scrunched up bits of paper containing untold mathematical formula were scattered everywhere he looked.

“No wonder Jimmy decided to quit,” Milon mused as he worked. This place stank almost as bad as the monsters.

Milon thought about what Balthazar had told him. Why would a scientist bother creating a race of monsters and then filling the castle with them? If his aim was to chase off the owner of the castle, it seemed counter-intuitive to first fill that castle with monsters that would ensure you could never go in there.

Granted the man seemed intent on taking over the world, but Milon had already seen that these monsters were more of an inconvenience than a danger. Some of them, like Balthazar, were really very friendly.

The more Milon thought about it, the more his head hurt, and Milon hated it when his head hurt. His mother had always insisted that headaches were a sign of brain cancer and had dragged Milon down to the infirmary more times than he had fingers for. His earliest memory was of sitting in a hospital flicking through a five-year-old copy of *Women’s Own* magazine. To be fair, it had been one of the most exciting days of his life.

A few short hours later the Professor pronounced the Dragon-Killing Death Ray ready for use. As a final touch, the Professor uncorked

the back of the gun's stock and poured into it the contents of the vial that Milon recovered from the castle. The Red Goo slurped down inside the device and the Professor slammed the cork down on top of it. He held it aloft above his head, like he were in some kind of *Zelda* game.

"It's ready!" he declared.

"So is your laundry, Professor," Milon told him.

"Excellent!" The exchange was amicable and swift. The Professor took the clean laundry in hand, bundled it up into a ball, and threw the whole lot into the incinerator.

A blast of fire – the faintest whiff of lavender soap – and the pile of laundry was gone.

"Thank the great Archimedes for that!" Professor Von Staten exclaimed. "I've been meaning to do that for years!"

Milon decided to leave quickly. He took the cheap-looking Dragon-Killing Death Ray and pocketed it with the bubble gun.

"Let's do this!" he squeaked.

* * *

The dragon was just as gigantic as Milon remembered. It sat in the corner of the room, its huge head resting on its legs. Plumes of smoke billowed out of its nostrils, and with every breath a hot wind blew through the chamber, threatening to whip the hat right off of Milon's head. It was sleeping.

Milon crept closer. The dragon snorted in its sleep and Milon was suddenly aware that he was missing his eyebrows.

"Steady now," he muttered. "Got to be as quiet as possible..."

He picked his way between the powdered remains of animal bones and crept up to the monster's side. Years of practice tip-toeing around his mother when she was suffering one of her headaches came back to Milon in a flash. He made no sound as he slipped the Dragon-Killing Death Ray from his pocket and held it trembling in his hands.

Another step. Now he was within spitting distance of the dragon's tail (not that Milon would have dared spit on it; his mother would have killed him).

Slowly – achingly slowly – Milon raised the Dragon-Killing Death Ray, sighted down its barrel and gently – oh, so gently – pulled the trigger.

There was a sudden blast of noise like a klaxon going off. "DRAGON-KILLING DEATH RAY ACTIVATED!" a harsh electronic voice crackled out the side of the gun. "BEGINNING PRE-FIRE WARM-UP SEQUENCE. COMMENCING CHARGE COUNTDOWN!"

The dragon's eye shot open. Milon was suddenly treated to a full-length reflection of himself in the huge slitted eye before it suddenly pulled away and he found himself staring into its mouth.

“TEN...NINE...EIGHT...”

The dragon roared and a jet of fire rushed from its jaws.

Milon dived to one side, narrowly avoiding the flames. He scrambled to his feet. No time to look, he spun back the way he'd come and sprinted back down the hallway.

The dragon's fire followed him. The air was so hot it burned Milon's lungs to breathe, but, fortunately, the flame-retardant clothing he'd bought earlier saved him from the worst of it.

“SEVEN...SIX...FIVE...”

He could hear the sounds of pursuit behind him. The scrabbling of hard talons against the bare rock of the castle's foundations. The sound of great, leathery wings unfolding and beating at the sky as the monster – furious at being wakened from its slumber – stretched itself out to its full size and glared down at Milon. It looked much like an eagle might look while watching a tasty field mouse.

The Dragon-Killing Death Ray continued to wail out its betrayal of Milon's location. “FOUR...THREE...TWO...”

Milon stumbled around the corner, narrowly avoiding being hit as the dragon swung its tail hard at the wall. Dust and rubble filled the air, showering Milon in a cloud of debris. He coughed as he dragged himself through the broken remnants of bricks and mortar. He tried not to think about how much that would cost to fix.

For once, Milon's small size worked to his advantage. While the air was filled with dust, he ducked around the corner, pressing his back to the wall so the dragon wouldn't see him. He heard it sniffing at the air behind him, its nose grinding in the dust of the wall as it searched for Milon's remains.

Its steps were so massive they made the ground tremble, or maybe that was just Milon who was trembling.

Either way, he suddenly realised there was a rock in his hand. He wasn't aware of picking it up but, as he looked at it, he instantly knew what he needed to do.

He had only one shot at this.

“ONE...ZERO...DRAGON-KILLING DEATH RAY NOW FULLY CHARGED AND READY FOR FIRING. AWAITING FURTHER INPUT.”

Milon waited a moment and then, darting out from behind the wall, he flung the stone with all the strength his tiny body could muster.

The rock went hurtling past the dragon's head and the dragon whirled after it, flame jetting out from its jaws.

Milon jumped out from behind the wall. He pulled the trigger.

“COMMENCING FIRING SEQUENCE!”

There was a sudden and overwhelming feeling of redness. It was a strange feeling, like Milon were being stretched and squashed at the same time. The air seemed to ripple like flame and everything went suddenly silent.

The dragon arched its back in pain. Its head whipped back round towards Milon, but it was already too late. It roared silently, its jets of flame puny against that solid wall of red.

Milon stared the dragon right in its him-sized eyes. "Get the hell out of my castle," he said.

The red feeling grew, overwhelming all the other colour in the room, pushing the dragon away so that it looked as though Milon were staring at it from down the end of a very long tunnel. Smaller and smaller the dragon became until suddenly Milon realised that it was gone.

He released the trigger and colour slowly returned to the world.

"That," said Milon, a frantic grin plastered onto his 8-bit face. "Is how it's done!"

Chapter 7

“Finished!” Milon declared as he dumped the bubble gun and the spent Dragon-Killing Death Ray down on the estate agent’s table. His hat was plastered to his head with sweat and his hands were sticky with slime from all the monsters he had killed. He was going to need a bath tonight, that was for sure. Belatedly, he wondered if the castle actually had any running water.

“I’m done. Finished. Finito.”

The estate agent looked surprised to see Milon standing there, or maybe he was just horrified by his appearance. “All the monsters are gone?” he asked.

“All of them!” chirped Milon.

“The castle is completely free of monsters?”

Milon smiled back proudly.

Hudson grinned one of his dazzling smiles. “All the monsters are dead!” he repeated. He started laughing. “All of them dead!”

Milon chuckled along with him politely.

“It worked! I can’t believe it actually worked!”

“Well, it was touch and go for a while there,” Milon admitted.

Hudson threw his head back and roared laughter at the sky.

“Finally!” he cried, his fists clenched at the air.

“Yes, finally!” squeaked Milon. It must have taken him the better part of an afternoon.

The estate agent’s eyes blazed with triumph as he stared down at little Milon smiling at his feet. “You’ve no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this day,” he said. “All those years! All that planning! And now that castle is mine! Mine!”

“Yours?” The laughter died in Milon’s throat.

“Mine!” he declared. “It’s all written in the contract!” He brandished the piece of paper Milon had signed that morning and shook it like a weapon. “You didn’t read the small print, son!”

Maybe Milon was hearing things, but he could have sworn he heard a dramatic music sting from somewhere in the distance.

Hudson threw his head back once more, his normally good-natured chuckle breaking apart into a high-pitched cackle that was pretty much the universal sign of evil.

“Bwa-hahahahahaha!”

He hopped from one foot to the other and back again, his eyes almost as wide as Milon's gaping mouth. "Paragraph 4," he read. "The castle shall remain the property of the BUYER until such a time as there are no more monsters (slimes, dragons ogres and other differently-abled beasts) living inside. Upon the death of all aforementioned monstrous beasts, the castle's deed in its entirety shall pass into the hands of its original owner."

"Its original owner?" Milon asked, confused.

"Me! Hudson Soft!" Hudson rolled up the contract and stuffed it in his pocket. "You were so easily duped! So easily fooled! I couldn't believe my luck in finding someone as stupid as you!"

That was strange; Milon's mother – God rest her soul – had always said the exact opposite.

"But I don't get it," Milon confessed, scratching his head in confusion.

"Long ago this castle belonged to me, but then Professor Von Staten came along and tricked me out of it with that ridiculous contract of his. I should never have gone drinking with him that night. Never gamble with a man who knows science, son. They know how to cheat. Anyway, thanks to Von Staten, I was bound to a contract that said the castle would never be mine until it was free of monsters. But now the monsters are all dead, and the castle is mine once more!"

"But..." Now Milon was really confused. He even went as far as pulling his hat off his head so he could give his scalp a good scratching, but it still didn't seem to help much. "That doesn't make any sense. I mean, why didn't you just kill all the monsters yourself? You already had the bubble gun and you seem more than able to use it so why bother hiring me to...?"

"That's right!" screamed Hudson, who wasn't listening anymore. "You've been hoodwinked! Bamboozled! You did all my hard work for me and now, if you'll excuse me, I have a castle to return to."

"Hold it!" shouted Milon, angrily. He stepped forward to block Hudson's path and in each hand he brandished one of Professor Von Staten's weapons. "Only my mother gets to call me a fool!"

Milon looked down at the dried blood covering his hands and he felt a strange anger that he had never felt before. He looked at the treacherous estate agent towering before him, and his body trembled with rage.

All those years of people calling him names. All those years of people mocking him and beating him up. All those years of neglect from a mother who had never wanted him and who had even faked her own death to be rid of him.

Milon had had enough.

“DRAGON-KILLING DEATH RAY ACTIVATED!” the gun chirped in his hand as he pressed the trigger. “BEGINNING PRE-FIRE WARM-UP SEQUENCE. COMMENCING CHARGE COUNTDOWN!”

“There is one more monster left in that castle!” he shouted over the gun’s chatter. “A monster you didn’t think of before. A monster whom I didn’t kill!”

It was strangely satisfying seeing the smile vanish from Hudson’s face. “You left a monster alive?” he gasped.

Lightning crackled in the distance.

“That’s right!” said Milon as he pulled himself up to his full height and stared Hudson squarely in the groin. “A monster that you never even considered until now: Me!”

Hudson snorted. “You’re no monster.”

“Aren’t I? I wasn’t when I first met you, that’s true. But I’ve done things in that castle that I never thought I would. I’ve killed monsters – hundreds of lives snuffed out by my hand, leaving it now a crit-i-cal-ly end-an-ger-ed species. I tricked a scientist into helping me. I killed a dragon and messed with causality. I’ve caused untold collateral damage to my own property. Look up monster in the dictionary and then tell me if that’s not what I am!”

Hudson was staring at the castle behind Milon, his eyes wide in his skull. He fell back clutching his head. “No!” he cried. “I don’t believe it!”

“You’d better believe it,” Milon said, advancing on him menacingly. “Because I’m telling you...”

There was a distant crash from somewhere behind Milon. Though he was no expert in the matter, it sounded uncannily similar to the sound a castle wall might make if it were suddenly knocked over by something very, very big.

“You left one of them alive!” Hudson screamed. For the first time, Milon realised that maybe the estate agent hadn’t been listening to him after all.

Milon whirled around and was treated to a sight that would be haunting his dreams for years to come. A gigantic red blob rose above the castle ramparts, broken glass and debris sliding from its blubbery side like wet mud off a window. It gaped massively at the naked sky, its huge unblinking eye gazing out hungrily across the castle grounds.

From its side, several long tentacle-like protrusions whipped forth at the castle walls. One of the castle’s towers toppled like a giant Jenga set being turned on its side.

“That looks like Balthazar,” Milon mused. “Only really, really big for some reason...”

"You knew about this?" Hudson screamed at him. "You left that thing alive on purpose?"

"Well yeah, but Balthazar's harmless," Milon defended as he watched another of his friend's tentacles whip out, destroying a wall in a shower of dust.

Rocks rained down over the castle grounds. One of them narrowly missed hitting the gift shop.

"He used to be harmless anyway..."

"I told you – they aren't just any monsters! They're like goldfish!"

"Oh," said Milon who remembered once asking his mother if he could have a pet goldfish for Christmas and being rewarded with a clip around the ear instead. To this day, it was the best Christmas present he had ever received. "You mean they have a six-second memory?"

"No!"

"You buy them at a funfair and they die on the way home?"

"No!"

"Their poo is all stringy-looking?"

"No!" thundered Hudson as he stared in horror at the destruction raining around them. "They grow exponentially! Put them in a container and they will grow larger to fill it. As long as there were other monsters in the castle, it kept them in a kind of equilibrium with each other. They were forced to stay small or they would run out of food and, besides, Colin the dragon was always there to kill any that got too big. But with only one of them left and no dragon..."

"I see," said Milon who was feeling more confused than ever. "I don't suppose it's too late to get my money back, is it?"

"Fool!" Hudson clipped Milon around the ear. "You get in there right now and clean up this mess you've caused! And don't come back here until that monster is dead, you hear?"

"Why should he?" shouted a voice from behind Milon.

Milon turned only to find Professor Van Staten limping through the grass towards them. The Professor was still wearing little more than a tatty lab coat but at least he had bothered to pull on a pair of old Wellingtons and an old fedora hat that looked older than he was.

"If he kills that monster," said Von Staten, "this castle will be yours again. I don't know about young Jimmy here, but I'd much rather see this castle fall."

Hudson screamed with rage. He snatched one of the guns from Milon's hand: the Dragon-Killing Death Ray which Milon had only just finished charging and jabbed it towards the scientist's head. "You did this, Alfred! Now fix it!"

The Professor laughed. "I'll do nothing of the sort," he said. Only then did Milon realise that there was a gun in his hand too.

The two men glared at each other, their hatred fizzling through the air between them like heat above a fire. The monster who had once been Balthazar continued its mindless rampage through what remained of the castle. Already, it had doubled in size.

Only Milon was being ignored.

If there was one thing Milon wasn't used to, it was being ignored. Beaten up, sure. Laughed at, definitely. His own mother – God rest her soul – had once knitted Milon a jumper with the words “Kick me” stitched onto the back, and for a whole week Milon had easily been the most talked about thing at school.

Milon didn't like being ignored.

Without even thinking, he raised the bubble gun towards the two men and fired off a string of bubbles in their direction.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, suddenly, Hudson reeled back screaming. He clutched his fingers to his face in agony and Milon was shocked to see that beneath his fingers, the estate agent's skin was boiling away as though being scoured by acid. Grease ran in rivers from his hair. His Rolex dripped gold paint onto the floor.

“You fool!” he hissed. “You stupid idiot!”

As Milon watched, the estate agent also doubled in size. Things bulged and rippled beneath his pin-striped suit. His body became fatter and rounder, his legs thinner and darker. Then the suit burst open. Milon had a glimpse of black and yellow fur, huge black eyes and a pair of antenna above his head. A pair of wings sprouted from Hudson's back as the last of his suit fell away in a burst of cheap cloth.

“A bee!” Milon gasped. “Y-you're a monster too!”

Professor Von Staten scowled up at the estate agent, a look of the deepest satisfaction in his eyes. “So, Hudson,” he growled. “Now you show your true form!”

“Bzzzzz! You foolzzzzz!” Hudson buzzed at them both. “I guezzzzz if you want zzzzzomething doing, you've got to do it yourzzzzzself!”

Then he was off, flying towards the castle on his spindly little wings.

Hudson was gigantic for a bee but he was tiny in comparison to Balthazar, who was now taller than the castle's highest tower. The two monsters reared against each other, two Godzilla-like beasts sizing each other up before a battle. Balthazar roared at Hudson and Hudson dived for Balthazar's eye, stinger first. Balthazar batted him away with a tentacle before flinging a piece of tower in his direction. Hudson danced easily away and jabbed once more at Balthazar's eye.

Back and forth the combatants went, thrusting and parrying at each other with the castle in ruins around them.

Milon watched, his mouth agape. Professor Van Staten came up beside him and rested a claw-like hand on his shoulder. "Now you know the truth," he said. "Now you know why this castle and everything in it have always been a secret."

"You knew about this," Milon guessed. "You knew Hudson was a monster."

"I'm not entirely evil, you know," the Professor said. "I might want to take over the world in my spare time, but I would never destroy it the way that monster would. That's why I set up shop here in the first place and tricked him out of the castle's deed. Left to his own devices, Hudson Soft would take over the whole world. Thanks to your efforts today, I don't think that'll be a problem anymore."

He looked down at Milon and smiled a grandfatherly smile. In the distance, Milon saw another tower topple away in a burst of debris and angry buzzing.

"You know, I could still use a good assistant around here," Von Staten told him. "There's not going to be much of a castle left after all this is over but there are still plenty of secrets to find. Did you know there's a princess hidden somewhere in the castle, for example? Rescue her and I'm sure she'll reward you handsomely."

"Uh..." said Milon.

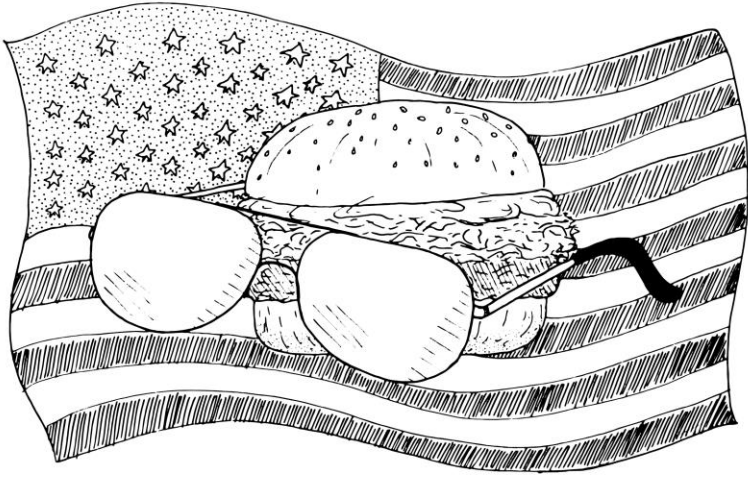
Without saying another word, Milon turned and ran away from that place as fast as his stumpy little legs could carry him. He ignored the horrible battle happening behind him. Ignored the Professor's calls of "Jimmy!" following him down the path.

His mother had been right all along: Milon was no hero. He was just a silly elf-like thing with a stupid blue hat, good for nothing more than being taken advantage of. As long as he stayed here, he was sure that people would continue to use him and lie to him in order to achieve their own aims. Maybe it would be the Professor's turn to transform into a monster next. Or maybe this Princess he had talked about would actually turn out to be some sort of laser-firing robot intent on wiping out humanity.

Frankly, Milon was in no hurry to find out.

"I'm a complete idiot!" Milon told himself. But that was okay. He would rather live his life as a happy fool than as a dead hero.

And he would rather be either of those things than the owner of some stupid secret castle.



BAD DUDES

by Ramona Donohue

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a test, or a drill, or a prank, or anything other than the truth. As crazy as it seems, and I know it does, President Ronnie, our beacon in the shining city on the hill we call America, has been kidnapped. Please, remain calm. Details are still emerging, but early reports seem to indicate that the deed was done by a band of ninjas. We do not know why he was abducted nor what the ninjas want with him, but what we do know is that the Secret Service has sent out a call for dudes. If you think you have the qualifications necessary to rescue the president, we ask you to ask yourself just one question: Are you a bad enough--”

Static temporarily filled the store as the voice on the radio was cut off. The man behind the counter of the local E-Z Way turned the dial, a bored look on his face. Finally, finding an appropriate easy-listening soft rock station to the enjoyment of all in the store, he returned to his job of placing hot dogs on the heat rollers.

It was Tuesday at 10:30 o'clock, when all good little boys should be in school, learning the three Rs and filling their heads with times tables and syllables and other important learning. But Spencer and Trevor were not good little boys. In fact, these two rascallions had decided to spend the day outside of the public education system, playing hooky. With money fresh from their mother's purses and a spring in their step, the E-Z Way was their heaven, a place where any hip loiterer could spend his day in peace.

“Hey man, do you want to get some juice?” said Spencer.

“Juice? Doesn't that promote good health and a happy disposition? Flip that, dude, get some sugary and caffeinated soda,” replied Trevor.

Spencer smiled. Trevor had passed the test. Spencer had known him for less than a year, since his father had transferred to the Pentagon in Washington D.C. Back in his old hometown Spencer had been the top cat, quick with a penknife and even quicker with a bag of Hot Cheetos. Now with Trevor it seemed he might be able to navigate through 6th grade after all.

Everybody at his new school was a nerd, except for Trevor. He didn't study or wipe his shoes when he stepped indoors. "Please" and "Thank You" were not in his vocabulary. He had once even called the teacher a total bore. In Trevor, Spencer had found a kindred spirit, one with whom he could share a snack that would totally ruin the dinner his grandmother had slaved over a hot stove to make for him that night. Toothpick in mouth and a sneer across his face, he grabbed a bottle of Jolt Cola and headed towards the checkout counter.

"My good man, I'll take this drink and a pack of candy cigarettes, which in addition to being bad for me, will help promote a smoking habit I hope to develop at the nearest possible opportunity," Spencer said.

"Shouldn't you kids be in school?" said the man behind the counter, shoveling hot dog after hot dog onto the greased rolling tube.

"Hey man, why don't you mind your own biz," said Trevor quite rudely. "School is for weenies!"

"Yeah," Spencer added, "and as the old saying goes, my associate and I are way too cool for it."

"Yes, schooler is for droolers!" said Trevor, letting loose a strand of saliva to underline his point.

The man behind the counter set down the meat tubing. "Now you listen here! If you have that attitude, how will you get into a good college and make something of your life?"

This man's attempt to curb the behavior of these two boys was quite gallant, and I for one admire it. But unfortunately I am not the one his speech is directed towards, and while he was lecturing, the boys saw an opportunity to raise some heck. The dexterous hands of Spencer reached towards the hot dog dispensary next to him, and he began to pile dog after dog into his pocket, a pool of grease accumulating underneath them. Meanwhile Trevor, with the quickness and slyness usually reserved for a cat chasing a laser dot around the house, stuffed several packs of gum down his shirt, placing them underneath his armpits in a way that can best be described as gross. The man behind the counter did not notice these transgressions, too engrossed in his own speech to pay attention to what was happening in front of him.

"Okay, we're sorry for our behavior," lied Spencer.

"Yeah, it was unbecoming and not the demeanor that young men such as us should be displaying," said Trevor while a wicked smile attempted to escape his lips.

“Thank you,” said the shopkeeper. “Normally I’d be suspicious of such a heel-face turn and would think you boys may be taking advantage of me, but I am inexperienced in the way of children and have yet to recognize the signs of being suckered.”

The boys paid for their soda and candy, guaranteed to cause them cavities in the future because they don’t brush their teeth, which was another bad habit of theirs I forgot to mention, and left the store. When they got outside the tower of giggles that had only been held by the tape of not-wanting-to-be-caught fell apart, and they began to laugh loud and hard.

“I can’t believe he fell for it!” said Spencer.

“Yeah, that old patoot couldn’t tell his derriere from a hole in the ground!” said Trevor.

“Cool beans, my main man!” said Spencer in a manner of which I do not understand.

“Gnarly Charlie!” said Trevor, despite the fact that the child he was talking to was named Spencer.

Spencer pulled out a celebratory hot dog to mark the occasion, eating it without the bun and also severely undercooked. It tasted like victory. Trevor chewed his stolen gum, perhaps deriving extra pleasure out of the miscreant way he obtained the gum in the first place. The package said that it would whiten his teeth, and maybe help his oral hygiene problem that we previously spoke about, but all it did was blacken his soul.

Then Trevor did something I would normally disapprove of but in this case proved to be just the right thing for the situation, something that would alter both of those boys’ lives for the better, something that would save them from a lifetime of hooliganism and instead make them into paragons of virtue even the Boy Scouts would salute. He spit out his gum onto the sidewalk, even though there was a garbage can right beside him. Spencer laughed and took another bite of his hot dog.

“Excuse me,” said a voice behind them, “but I think you dropped something, fella.”

Trevor turned around, a rude statement already queued up on his lips, only to look upon the brick wall they were leaning up against. But how? Was perhaps the building itself a sentient being that was not impressed with the attitude of these two boys? Maybe, but we’ll never find out, cause another voice called out to them, “Up here pal!”

The boys looked up on the rooftop of the E-Z Way, whereupon two striking figures looked right back down at them. Clad in black tank tops and jeans, their hair flowing in the wind, with a pair of bright white sneakers on each foot, the two men hopped down from the roof, landing in front of the boys. On one man there was a pair of grey shorts. On the other, green shorts. Their muscles glistened in the light of the sun.

“Woah!” said both boys simultaneously, taken aback by the coolness of the men in front of them.

“Woah is right,” said the man with grey shorts, “but the only ‘woah’ we should be talking about is what you spit on the ground there.”

“Not only is it rude to the people who walk upon the sidewalk here, but it simply isn’t gnarly to spit out gum when there’s still so much flavor trapped in there,” said the man with the green shorts.

“Like the man once said, waste not want not, my cowabunga friends.”

“Who are you?” asked Spencer, still reeling from the coolness in front of him.

“We’re the Bad Dudes!” said the Bad Dudes.

“I’m Chet!” said the Bad Dude with the grey shorts.

“And I’m Jonesy!” said the Bad Dude with the green shorts.

“Awesome!” screamed Trevor.

“Wicked awesome!” corrected Spencer. “You know Dudes, we think of ourselves as pretty bad too!”

“Yeah! We bad! So bad,” said Trevor.

“Bad, eh?” said Green Bad Dude. “Well, I’ll tell ya what. We’re on our way to rescue President Ronnie.”

“From what?” asked Spencer.

“You don’t know? Well, keeping up with current events certainly isn’t ‘bad,’ and I mean ‘bad’ as in ‘good’ even though this slang is confusing and contradictory,” said Jonesy.

“Word up,” said Chet, “if you had listened to your local news affiliate you’d be both informed and enriched, but now we have to explain ourselves. You see, the President has been kidnapped by ninjas.”

“Tubular!” said Trevor.

“More like ‘treasonbular,” Chet continued. “It’s now our job, as Bad Dudes, to rescue him. But maybe we can let you kids tag along!”

“Can we really?” asked Spencer. “That sounds better than spending the day in a classroom!”

“Or at my grandma’s house when she wants to spend time with her only grandson but I’m only interested in hanging out with my delinquent friends and causing all sorts of problems and I speak very rudely to her and rebuff her whenever she tries to give me good advice that she knows from her years of experience in life,” said Trevor.

“Then let’s get going, boys. We’ll show you what it *really* means to be a Bad Dude,” said Jonesy.

The Bad Dudes and the boys then left the parking lot. The boys took off at a full sprint, running down the sidewalk, presumably pushing people out of the way, while the Bad Dudes followed at a brisk but respectful pace.

“Now if you want to really be a Bad Dude, there are a few rules you need to follow,” said Chet.

“Woah woah woah, wait a minute,” said Spencer. “Rules? Following? This is starting to sound like school to me!”

“Not all learning is done in the classroom, my friend,” said Chet. “Sometimes you gotta take to the streets to learn what the world is really about.”

“Expand your worldview, dude!” said Jonesy.

The group approached a crosswalk. A little old lady stood next to them, waiting for the light to turn green. Trevor tapped his foot impatiently.

“Aw, forget this!” he said with a roar. “Let’s go already!”

Spencer and Trevor went to take off down the street. Just then, a truck came out of nowhere, showing no signs of slowing down. The boys looked into the headlights and gave a yell before feeling a tug on the back of their collars. Jonesy pulled the duo back just before the truck collided with them.

“Looks like you boneheads made a Bad Dude Blunder!” Jonesy chastised.

“I know, we should have looked both ways before--”

“Not that, my main man! You boys didn’t offer your help to this groovin’ granny over here!” Jonesy corrected.

“Bad Rule number one: If you see an elderly woman on the sidewalk, always help her cross the street,” said Chet. “Their hips aren’t

quite what they used to be, and sometimes a couple of big, strong boys like you two can assist them.”

“These lights seem to get shorter and shorter every year,” said the little old lady.

“Scuse me madam, but would you care for us to help you with that?” offered Chet.

“Oh, I’d be delighted!”

With that, Chet and Jonesy lifted the woman off the street and onto their shoulders. When the walk signal began to flash, they confidently strided across the street with her in tow. Finally, they set her down.

“Thank you young men!” she exclaimed. “Can I give you a reward? I think I keep a couple pennies at the bottom of my purse!”

“No thanks ma’am,” said Jonesy. “Bad Rule numero dos: virtue is its own reward.”

Trevor and Spencer looked at each other awkwardly.

“This is not how I pictured being a Bad Dude would be,” said Spencer.

“Being bad isn’t all ninjas and presidents, bub!” said Chet. “There are lots of ways you can be bad in your everyday lives!”

“On our way to the ninja’s hideout, let’s make a little pit stop to prove this point!” added Jonesy.

The group headed down the street to the Golden Shades Retirement Home.

“Bad Rule number three,” said Chet. “Nothing is cooler than volunteer work in your community!”

“The best gift you can give is the gift of your time!” said Jonesy wisely.

“Um, I don’t...” Trevor began.

“Look, do you boys want to learn to be Bad Dudes or what?”

“Well yeah, but--”

“Then you guys need to have a little faith in us,” said Jonesy.

“Bad Rule number four: Have faith in your fellow man as you have faith for The Lord,” recited Chet.

The gang headed inside the home and began to volunteer. They pureed peaches for the folks with trouble chewing. They helped move handicapped individuals from their rooms into the common area. They played shuffleboard against the Golden Shades residents, who won. They helped hang up seasonal decorations on the home's corkboard. Most importantly, they made many residents at the home feel welcomed and loved, even if their own grandchildren are too busy playing on the Nintendo and eating sugary cereal to take the time to come see them. In fact, some of the residents had tried to connect with their grandchildren by playing those games but found them far too violent and inappropriate and couldn't believe that this was the sort of garbage that passed for entertainment nowadays. Back in the residents' day, they had been perfectly content with reading books that emphasized strong moral standings and time-honored themes. Books like *Anne of Green Gables*, now there was a good book for children, thought the residents. But no, instead they had overheard their grandchildren talking about how they always hated coming to visit the residents because they only had boring old books and not their precious, brain melting video games. Never mind that the residents had many interesting stories to tell, or that the residents weren't just flashing lights on the "boob tube," but instead real flesh and blood people. The grandchildren sure didn't have this attitude at their birthdays, oh no! When the residents gave them that \$25 check it was all smiles and well wishes and "I love you, residents!" But of course when the residents ask them to do something in return as simple as calling to say hello, or sending a thank-you card, it's nothing but eye rolling and feet dragging. Is it really such a pain to give your resident a call every once in a while? The same residents who brought your parents into the world? And don't even get the residents started on them! The residents certainly didn't raise their children to become parents who think it's acceptable to let a child eat McDonald's every other day. They can't even appreciate the value of a good home-cooked meal anymore. Whenever the residents try to make a hamburger for their grandchildren it's met with nothing but criticism that it doesn't taste like a Big Mac. What an ungrateful attitude to have towards your elders, thought the residents.

Spencer and Trevor had yet to learn this lesson, however, and were feeling rather grumpy.

"Chet, Jonesy, look," said Trevor, "I think we're gonna bounce."

"Yeah," said Spencer. "We thought being a bad dude would be cool fights and adventures, but it looks like you guys are more interested in things my grandma likes."

"Oh really?" said Chet. "Well maybe we can explain it in a way that YOU understand! Jonesy, drop a beat!"

Jonesy made strange sounds with his mouth while Chet decided to lay down some rap for the kids:

Well, well well, weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

I'm a rapping Bad Dude and I'm here to say

You should respect those around you every day

Be nice to other people by your own accord

It's twice as cool as riding a skateboard

Make sure to wash the dishes, clean your room, eat your peas

And don't forget to say "Thank you" and "Please"

Say no to drugs, just get a pizza slice

The only high you need is a high on life

Volunteer at your local community center

To an inner city child, you can be a mentor

Don't wear your hat backwards, put the bill in front

And take it off indoors, that is an affront!

I know that you want to be a bad dude

But that don't mean you need to be bad, dude

So don't just sit there, get off of your fanny

And maybe go and help your poor old granny.

The boys sat there for a little while.

“So...yeah, we’re gonna go,” said Trevor.

Suddenly, the sound of glass shattering filled the home. A ninja had jumped in through the window. He roared, picking up an easy chair and throwing it clear across the room. It hit the wall, breaking right in two. He beat his chest while screaming to the high heavens.

“IS THERE DUDE WHO BAD ENOUGH TO FACE ME?” he bellowed.

“Aw snap, here we go!” said Trevor with excitement.

“For sizzle,” said Spencer.

The boys ran towards the ninja, hands in the air, ready to unleash a flurry of punishment upon the ninja intruder. But before they could take a step forward, a hand rested on Trevor's shoulder. It was attached to Jonesy, who slowly shook his head.

“Boys...have we taught you nothing?” he sadly remarked.

In perfect unison, the two dudes walked over to the flowerbox by the broken window. Together, they picked a single posey, got on their knees, and handed it to the ninja.

“Bad Dude rule number 5, the final rule,” said Chet. “Always respect your fellow man, and solve conflicts through non-violence.”

“This is pretty much exactly the opposite of what I wanted to get out of today,” said Spencer.

But while the boys were complaining, a single tear had rolled down the ninja’s cheek. Upon taking the flower, he took off his mask, revealing the bald, Fu-Manchu mustached face.

“Thank you, comrades. Before now I only know way of cold Russian winter: hard and violent. But to you I owe thanks, for you show me warmth like body after vodka, which I now renounce. For this I shall help dudes who are bad. Call me Karnov.”

“Russian?” inquired Jonesy. “But aren’t ninjas usually oriental?”

“That grand trick in master plan!” said Karnov. “We trick Capitalists to thinking of enemy that lay in the east, while we take the skin of a sheep and disguise us thusly to gain entrance into the herd!”

“Spare us your Soviet metaphors! Where is the President? We’ll need him to combat Communists such as yourself.”

“No, now I follow way of dollar and God. Flower make me realize I have only one life to live, and I should spend it respecting elders and taking grandma to Sunday mass. Please, I show you hideout.”

“Okay,” said Trevor.

So the Bad Dudes and the boys followed Karnov to the hideout.

“Wow, I would have never guessed here,” said Jonesy.

They looked through the hideout’s window. Tied to a chair was President Ronnie, smiling as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“I’d be careful if I were you,” Ronnie warned to an unseen captor. “My fellow Americans will soon be here to rescue me, and then you’ll be one ninja gone under.”

“Silence!” a voice cried out from the shadows. “By the time they find you, my point will be proven.”

“Wait a minute...” said Chet. “I know that voice! I recognize it from my public news programming!”

Chet did indeed recognize the familiar drawl. For out from the shadows, a recognizable melanin spotted head appeared.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Jonesy. “It’s Gorby!”

“We gotta get in there!” said Spencer. “But how?”

“Please say!” said Karnov, opening the front door with his ninja key. The Bad Dudes and the boys ran in.

“Mr. President!” yelled Chet. “We’re from the government and we’re here to help!”

“Chet! Jonesy! Thank goodness you arrived safe and sound!” said Ronnie.

“Bad Dudes?!?” Gorby cried in terror! “Curses! Now plan ruined!”

“Just what were you going to do with him anyhow?” asked Trevor.

“I was going to show him that Soviet Russia has prepared hamburger twice as tasty as American counterpart!” said Gorby, gesturing toward his special charcoal grill.

“Ha!” laughed Jonesy. “Like anybody from Eastern Europe could make something as delicious as an all-American hamburger!”

“Yes? Well, let us do test!” said Gorby, rolling another grill up to the Bad Dudes. “If you can make hamburger better than mine, we will call game draw!”

Jonesy’s face went pale. “Uh oh, we might be in trouble now!”

“Neither of us know how to make a burger!” said Chet, fear on his face. “Do either of you boys know?”

“No!” said Spencer and Trevor.

“I’ve only ever experienced burgers out of the Irish grease factory McDonald’s!” said Spencer.

“And I too!” said Trevor.

“Looks like you boys need a helping hand,” said a mysterious voice from across the hideout. “Or should I say, *spatula?*”

Spencer whirled around, surprised. He knew that voice, although you’d never know it based on how little he called her.

“Gr-grandma?!?”

“I heard you boys may be in need of a burger!” said Grandma. “Luckily for you, I have been cooking quality burgers for years, which you would know if you ate them instead of spoiling your appetite at fast food joints!”

“All right!” said Chet! “Looks like we may be winning this one after all!”

“Win just one for the Gipper,” Ronnie added.

So Grandma cooked up the greatest burger of all time in American history. “Didn’t even break a sweat!” she quipped wittily.

“No!!!” yelled Gorby, before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

“I always knew great changes happened around the dinner table,” said Ronnie as Chet untied him.

“I hope you boys learned a lesson,” said Grandma.

“Boy, we sure did!” said Trevor.

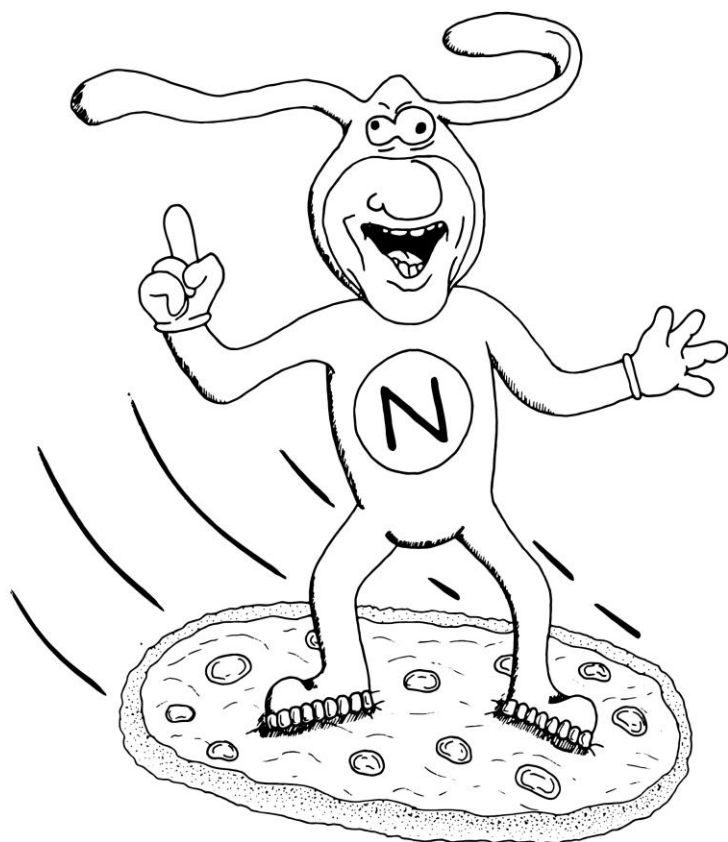
“Our elders are very important, and we should treat them with the respect they deserve!” explained Spencer.

“Good. Now if you boys excuse me, I think Chet and Jonesy want to try some of my homemade cherry pie.”

“Boy, would we!” the Bad Dudes said in unison.

“Mind if I tag along?” asked Ronnie.

“Not at all Mr. President,” said Grandma, taking them all in her arms and leaping into the sky. She flew through the air, happy to know that she was right and that the younger generation would now realize that. Everybody ate pie and it was great and hooray!



YO! NOID

by Jerod Mackert

Chapter 1

The wizard stood in an ancient castle at night, hunched over his table, the room lit by a skull with a candle on it. Lightning struck outside as his latest victim was brought before him. Bending his wand in preparation, the wizard wound up and fired a blast from it. The cobwebs that clung to the walls and furniture waved from the force of the blast as a beam shot from the wand to the wizard's target, wilting the target and covering it in ice. The wizard cackled with glee as he looked upon what he had done. The wand had done its job perfectly, but now it was time for the ultimate test. With a wave of the wand, the wizard disappeared from his lair.

Hundreds of miles away, in the kitchen of an average family's home, a flash of light burst through the room as the wizard appeared. His target lay before him on the kitchen table. Winding up as before, the wizard fired a beam at the target. But instead of wilting and freezing, the beam bounced right off of the target, backfiring onto the wizard instead. The wizard yelled in pain as he began to age rapidly. His hat fell to the ground, revealing him to be none other than the Noid! No matter how well his magic had worked against ordinary pizzas, there was no way he could break the spell of his primary target: a hot, fresh Domino's Pizza. The box opened on its own, flattening The Noid underneath its top.

"So call now! Domino's Pizza delivers hot and fresh!" the announcer said through the television.

"Take that, you stupid Noid!" Chad Jenkins screamed at the television. Chad loved Domino's pizza more than any other food in the whole world, and he wasn't about to let The Noid ruin it for him. He grabbed a sock from the floor of his room and threw it at the television furiously.

"Chad, are you yelling at the TV again?" his mom called from downstairs. This was not a rare occurrence.

"It's not my fault! The Noid is such a jerk!" Chad replied.

“Maybe you should go outside and play until dinner,” his mom said. “I worry about how much you watch TV. Ever since we moved here you’ve spent so much time indoors. I wish you would make some friends.”

“This place is weird,” Chad shot back defensively as he came downstairs. “Everyone at school ignores me. I wish we were back at our real house so I could play with my real friends.” Chad and his mom had moved from New York, New York to Bend, Oregon three months ago, after his parents had gotten divorced. Now it was just the two of them, trying to get by the best they could. The prospect of a high-paying secretarial position had brought them to Bend, and had dragged Chad from everything he had known. He knew that this was what was best for the two of them, but the change was no less difficult for him to adjust to.

“You’re just going to have to be more assertive if you want people at school to notice you,” his mom replied. “Dinner’s not for an hour. Go for a walk around town or something. Maybe you’ll find some friends. You’ll never know until you try, at least.”

“Dinner?” Now Chad was interested. “Domino’s, right?”

“It’s pizza night, so of course!” his mom said. No matter how bad things got, Friday Domino’s Pizza night was Chad’s anchor in the storm. With his mom being so busy with her secretary career, he could usually convince her to order delicious Domino’s pizza a few other nights a week, but no matter what, he was guaranteed to get it on Friday. Just the thought of it made him start to drool. The sooner he got out of the house and on that walk, the sooner time would hopefully fly until that pizza was his at last.

“Okay, mom, I’m going on that walk. I’ll see you later!” Chad said.

“Make some friends!” his mom called to him.

“Don’t eat any pizza before I get back!” Chad shot back, walking outside. He closed the door and took a deep breath, looking out at the neighborhood. At least the air here was nicer than New York, he thought to himself as he walked towards downtown.

Chapter 2

As Chad crossed the bridge on the way to Main Street, he had a hard time focusing. He looked up at the clouds in the sky. They sure did look familiar, he thought. Almost...like pizzas! Yes, a large Domino's pizza with pepperoni and mushrooms, with a 2-liter bottle of Coke to wash it down. The cloud next to it looked like a small vegetarian pizza with thin crust. And that one over there, looks just like a medium with sausage-*HOOOONK!*

A car swerved out of Chad's way as he jumped back onto the sidewalk. He had been so busy looking at the pizza clouds that he didn't realize that he had walked onto the road! "Whew, that was a close one," he said to himself. "I guess I had better focus on what's in front of me."

Chad reached Main Street in one piece and took in the sights. To his left was Video Palace, where he went to rent movies, as well as the latest Nintendo game tapes. Many weekend nights since he moved to Bend were spent in his room with his games, the blue glow of the Nintendo's power light casting a dim glow on his walls, Chad's joypad clicking and clacking away until he could hardly keep his eyes open. In fact, other than delicious Domino's pizza, video games were Chad's only friend in this lonely town. Speaking of which, straight ahead was the local Domino's from where Chad's mom had no doubt already called in their order. If he was lucky, he might even see the driver leave the store and head towards the house. But wait, something was happening. There was a crowd in front of the Domino's, and it looked like there were cop cars there! Chad became worried and ran toward the store. If something had happened to Domino's, or if someone had gotten hurt, pizza dinner might be canceled! Chad pushed through the crowd and made his way to the officer who was standing in front of a line of police tape that had been set up in front of the store.

"What's happening?" Chad asked the officer.

"We've got this under control, kid," the cop replied. "It's best if you just stand back and let the professionals handle it."

“Is this going to affect my dinner? My mom ordered pizza earlier and it’s very important that we get it.”

“Kid, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you’re not going to be getting your pizza today. Nobody is. All of the Domino’s pizza has been stolen! Every last one!”

Chad felt the world spin around him. All of the pizza? Gone?? All of it??? What was he going to do? What was he going to eat? How was he going to start the weekend without a piping hot Domino’s pizza?

“Kid, are you okay?” The policeman put his hand on Chad’s shoulder. Chad was hunched over, his hands on his knees, breathing heavily and trying not to faint.

“E-everything is terrible,” Chad finally managed to get out. “There’s no more food. I’m going to die.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not,” the officer said. Of course, he could never understand how Chad felt. “Don’t worry, kid. Domino’s already has one of their brightest men on the case. They’ll find your pizzas soon enough.”

“I-I need to go.” Chad pushed his way back out of the crowd and ran as fast as he could. Everything was a blur around him as he tried his best to make it home, although without Domino’s pizza waiting for him when he got there, what was even the point of going home? This never would’ve happened in New York, pizza capital of the world, Chad thought. He knew this town was trouble, and now he’d have to go without pizza for dinner. Who could’ve done such a thing? Chad stopped running and slapped his forehead. “Of course,” he yelled. “The Noid is behind this! He has to be!” All Chad had to do was track him down and put an end to his schemes. Then he could have as much pizza as he-
HOOOONK!

Chad really needed to stop walking in the street.

Chapter 3

Chad sat at the dinner table, miserable. As soon as he had made it home, he told his mom all about what the police officer had said: someone had stolen all of the Domino's pizza, and until the culprit was caught, there would be no pizza for anyone. He had told her about how he had figured out that the Noid was behind all of it, and how he needed to stop him to save Pizza Friday for everyone. His mom didn't seem nearly as concerned as Chad was; in fact, she insisted that he wait until after dinner before they talked about Chad enacting vigilante justice on the Noid.

And so Chad sat, waiting for his mom to finish making dinner, which was definitely not pizza. A pot of macaroni and cheese heated on the stove. At least cheese was something that you'd find on a pizza, but it just wasn't the same. Now his mom was chopping up vegetables to add to a salad. Why didn't she just kill him and get it over with? Chad sighed loudly, which did not go unnoticed.

"Chad, I'm doing the best I can tonight, so please try to be understanding," she said, mixing the vegetables in with the lettuce. "I'd order pizza from somewhere else, or run to the store to make a homemade pizza, but I don't want another incident like at Thanksgiving." She was, of course, referring to the famous incident two years ago when Chad demanded to have Domino's pizza instead of the turkey that was being prepared by his grandmother. Since they were in a pinch, his mom made him a pizza from ingredients at the house, and Chad threw a two-hour-long fit. Needless to say, grandma was less than impressed.

"Mom, you're living in the past," Chad replied. "That was a lifetime ago. I'm in fifth grade now! I'm much more mature!" He made a disgusted face as his mom handed him his salad, but managed to quickly turn it into a serviceable smile when she shot a glare back at him. Chad poked at the salad with his fork. "Anyway, like I was saying about all of the Domino's pizzas being stolen..."

“Let the cops handle it,” Chad’s mom said, taking a bite of her salad. “I’m sure it’s just some teenagers pulling a prank.”

“No, mom. It’s the Noid. I know it is. Just like in the commercials!”

His mom sighed. “Then let the cops find the Noid, Chad. They’re better at this kind of stuff than you are. A kid your age, running around town looking for trouble is likely to get hurt. Or worse.”

“My age?!” Chad was upset. “Mom, I’m almost 11. When will you stop treating me like a child? The cops can’t stop the Noid! He has too many tricks up his sleeve! Haven’t you seen his commercials? There’s no way the cops can stop his freeze gun, or his jackhammer. They’ll be toast unless an expert stops him.”

“Chad, listen. Maybe I shouldn’t have encouraged this pizza obsession. I know you love Domino’s pizza more than anything in the world, but I can assure you that there is no such thing as the Noid. He’s a mascot created by Domino’s to sell pizza. Nothing more. I’m worried about you, Chad. You haven’t made any friends since you moved here, and now you’re obsessed with finding and defeating a fictional character. Maybe you should see a th--”

Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door.

“Probably a salesman,” Chad’s mom said. “Hopefully he’ll go away. Anyway, as I was saying, when your dad and I got divorced, I was under a lot of stress, and it really helped to have someone to talk to. I think that you might also benefit from seeing a th--”

The knocking became a pounding. Whoever was at the door was not leaving anytime soon.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, heading towards the door. Chad wasn’t sure what she had been talking about before she got up, though he had not really been listening either. He was too busy pushing his salad into the shape of a pizza. The tomatoes would have to do for pepperoni, but it was nearly perfect. Oh man, what Chad wouldn’t give for a delicious Domino’s pizza right about now. All he had to do was hunt the Noid down and get all of the pizzas back.

Chad’s mom walked back into the dining room. She looked as pale as a ghost.

She spoke quietly. “There’s someone here to talk to you.”

Chad stood up and walked to the door. Whoever it was, he sure did have an effect on his mom. He opened the door and gasped.

“Mr. Jenkins, I am in need of your assistance,” a man said with a refined British accent.

“You...you...” Chad couldn’t find the words.

“Yes, Mr. Jenkins, I do believe you know who I am.”

It was the Noid!

GAME HINT

Input the jump command to pass uneven terrain and other hazards (holes).

Chapter 4

“Take that, you stupid jerk!” Chad screamed as he threw his shoe at the Noid. The Noid moved his head to the side just enough for the shoe to fly by and land outside next to another shoe, two pillows, a yo-yo and a handful of change.

“Mr. Jenkins, for the last time, please hear me out,” the Noid said, looking exasperated. Chad began to take off his sock for the next assault, but finally his mom stepped in.

“Chad, that’s no way to treat a guest,” she said. “What has gotten into you?”

“Mom, he stole all the pizzas, and now he’s here to mock me!” Chad replied. “I have to stop him and get all of the pizzas back!”

“Mr. Jenkins,” the Noid said. “If you’d stop attacking me for one minute, you’d know that I had nothing to do with the pizza theft. In fact, if I had stolen the pizzas, why on Earth would I come here to tell you about it?”

“Because you’re a liar!” Chad yelled, his face turning red. The second sock made its way towards its target, but missed like all the rest.

“The truth is,” the Noid said, “I have been charged with finding the stolen pizzas and returning them safely. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“You’re the Noid!” Chad replied. “You hate Domino’s! Why would you want to find their pizzas? This is what you wanted all along!”

“I don’t hate Domino’s at all, Chad,” the Noid explained. “I’m their top security agent. You see, the character of the Noid is merely a ruse. What better way to find out about those who actually wish Domino’s harm than to act like their greatest enemy? The commercials only serve to strengthen the lie.”

This explanation made perfect sense to Chad. "Of course! The perfect lie!" he said. "So why do you need my help then? I'm just a young adult with slightly above-average skill."

"Your experience with Domino's pizza is well-known throughout the company. You've eaten more Domino's pizza than anyone in the entire world. I've got just a few leads on the pizza thief and his whereabouts, but we're hoping that you'll be able to help us. Surely your knowledge of pizza will come in handy."

Chad had always suspected that he was the number one Domino's customer, but to hear it out loud was a feeling that he couldn't even begin to explain. He had never been more proud in his entire life. "I'd love to help you, Mr. Noid, but looking for pizza sounds dangerous. What if I get hurt?"

"Nonsense," the Noid replied. "I have been expertly trained in twelve types of martial arts. No harm will come to you. In addition, you will be handsomely rewarded for your efforts."

"Rewarded?" Now he was talking.

"Of course. My bosses wouldn't ask you to help me for free. If we find these missing pizzas, they are prepared to give you free Domino's pizza for life, and perhaps even a position with the company once you're old enough."

Chad couldn't believe his ears. Free pizza for life! He could have pizza for every meal from that point forward until he died a happy old man. And a position at Domino's! He had been checking out their job openings since he could read. It had always been his dream to work at Domino's. He knew that he would learn fast and earn cash and respect through his hard work, if only he were old enough to actually apply. And now he was guaranteed a job! What would he do? Deliver pizzas? Take orders? Bake the pizzas??? Dare he dream?

"Mom!" Chad yelled, not realizing that she was right next to him. "Can I go with him?"

"Well, I suppose so," his mom replied. "I'm just glad you finally made a friend. Be back before bedtime though, or you're in trouble!"

"Oh boy!" Chad jumped straight into the air. "Where do we go first, Noid?"

"We'll need to ask some of my contacts in the area for some clues," the Noid replied. "I hate to admit it, but my trail has gone a bit cold."

"Do you know who stole the pizzas?" Chad asked.

The Noid's face turned pale as he looked down at the floor. "I'd...rather not talk about it right now." He quickly regained his composure and looked Chad in the eye. "We'll have plenty of time to discuss this later, but we really need to be going."

"I'll go get my stuff," Chad said. He walked past the Noid and out the front door. Chad grabbed his shoes, socks, yo-yo and change off of the ground, where they had landed earlier.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Chapter 5

Chad and the Noid arrived at Bend's docks. Shipping crates were scattered everywhere, and a crane sat abandoned. This was where they would begin their search for the missing pizzas. How they had gotten to this point was an amazing series of events. The Noid speaking to his contact in the pizza underworld, the resulting car chase, the Noid's expert car-handling skills allowing him to pull off aerial maneuvers that Chad had never even dreamed of; these things made for an hour of excitement that Chad would never forget. He felt a small amount of pity for anyone who was unable to witness such a spectacle. But enough about that, Chad thought. It was time to focus on the task at hand. The chase had led the Noid to finding out that the thief was last seen at the docks, and they would search every crate if they had to in order to find another clue.

"So where do we start?" Chad asked. This place was huge; he had no idea how they were going to find anything here. All of the workers had already gone home, too, so it's not like they could ask anyone if they had seen anything.

"Hmm, good question, Chad, but I may have just the trick," the Noid replied. He reached up over his head and began to adjust a knob near one of his ears.

"What are you doing?" Chad had never noticed the knob in any of the commercials, or even until that very moment.

"This is more than just your ordinary Noid suit," the Noid explained. "It has been outfitted with the top of the line in spy technology. For example, my ears have a built-in receiver that should pick up any sounds, no matter how faint, from anywhere in the area." As The Noid turned the dial, an antenna rose from the top of his head. When it was about a foot long, the top opened into a large dish that began to spin and beep. The Noid closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds that his antenna picked up. All Chad could do was watch, his mouth open in awe from the impressive spy techniques that he was currently witnessing.

Suddenly the Noid lifted his head and looked to his right. "Over there," he said, pointing towards one of the shipping crates. "Something is in that crate. Perhaps it's someone we can question. We'll have to be quiet; we don't want to scare away whoever it is." Chad and the Noid crept towards the crate slowly. Chad's heart was pounding; he didn't want to blow their cover and disappoint the Noid. That might end his chances of having free pizza and a Domino's career.

"At the count of three, we open the crate," the Noid whispered. "One, two..." Chad could barely keep it together. "Three!" The two of them swung the door open, and a rat ran out of the crate towards Chad. Chad screamed at the top of his lungs, the noise echoing throughout the facility. Pigeons flew away in terror. The Noid shot him a glare. Chad was about to apologize and beg forgiveness when the two of them spotted someone running away into a maze of shipping crates.

"Stop!" Chad screamed, starting to run after him, but the mysterious stranger had too much of a head start for Chad to ever catch up to him.

"Leave this to me," the Noid said, pressing a button on his belt. Wheels popped out of the bottoms of his shoes, creating an instant pair of roller skates. "I'll be right back," he said as he took off into the crates. Moments later a crash echoed through the docks, and the Noid came skating back with a man slung over his shoulder. The Noid dropped the man on the ground in front of Chad.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" the man asked.

"Domino's is missing all of its pizzas, and you're going to tell me where they are," the Noid replied.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You're gonna hear from my lawyer!" The man was clearly upset about being attacked.

"You're lying!" Chad screamed.

"Oh yeah, prove it!"

This was Chad's moment to shine. "There's no Domino's pizza in this entire town. So why do I smell Domino's Bacon Cheeseburger Feast on you?" Chad took a quick look and saw a slice hanging out of the man's back pocket. The man broke into a sweat.

"I-it's not my fault! He made me help him! I just made sure the coast was clear before he passed through here, and I was hungry so he gave me some delicious Domino's pizza for my trouble!"

"Where is he now?" the Noid asked, becoming irritated.

“He didn’t tell me, I swear! All he said was ‘Ice working with you.’”

“You mean ‘Nice working with you,’” the Noid said.

“No, I specifically remember him saying ‘ice.’ He said it about three or four times to make sure I understood him. I think he thought he was funny or something.”

“Hmm, I wonder what this could mean,” the Noid said.

“Ice?” Chad asked. “Like at the ice rink?”

“That’s it!” the Noid exclaimed. “He must have meant the local ice rink! Well done, Chad!”

“Am I free to go?” the man asked.

“I’ve already notified the police,” the Noid replied. “They’ll deal with you shortly. Aiding a pizza thief is a very serious crime.” The Noid turned to Chad. “Come now, we have no time to lose. To the ice rink!”

Chapter 6

Bend Ice Palace was as crowded as it always was on a Friday night. It was the place to be on the weekend; anyone who was anyone skated here, hanging out with their friends and listening to the latest pop tunes played by the DJ. Chad was usually at home, playing Nintendo cassettes. All he knew was that finding the pizza thief in this crowd was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack.

The Noid paid the man at the counter and they walked over to pick out their skates. He must be loaded in order to so casually pay for two tickets to the ice rink and two pairs of skates, Chad thought. Working for Domino's must be the best job in the world.

"I'm going to find the manager and find out if he's seen anything out of the ordinary," the Noid told Chad as they laced up. "You'll be in charge of skating around the rink, looking for anything suspicious."

"Um, I've never been ice skating before," Chad said. He had played plenty of hockey video games, but he wasn't sure if that knowledge would transfer into the real world.

"You haven't been ice skating?" The Noid could barely believe what he was hearing. "I've been skating since my days in boarding school. Not to worry; I'm sure you'll pick it up in no time." The Noid stood up. "Well, I'm on my way to find the manager. Best of luck to you, Chad." And with that he was off.

Chad waddled awkwardly towards the entrance to the ice, trying not to fall over. Walking on blades was going to take some getting used to. He carefully stepped onto the ice, and, hugging the wall, started to make his way around. After a few laps, he was even able to stand on his own. This was pretty easy, Chad thought. He could do this all day, as long as he didn't have to change direction, speed up, slow down, or stop. Things were definitely looking up.

Nothing looked particularly suspicious as Chad slowly made his way around and around the rink. It looked like a typical Friday night. Girls

skating in groups, enjoying the New Guys songs playing over the intercom, kids hanging around the arcade machines, two teenagers making out in the corner, a man in a trench coat entering the mechanical room...oh, no! That must be the pizza thief, Chad thought. He quickly looked around for the Noid, but he was nowhere to be found. Chad would have to get to him by himself. All he had to do was make it to the other side of the rink without falling onto the ice. Chad began to work his way across the rink, a direct violation of the clockwise skating rule. He didn't have time for rules, though; the fate of the town's pizzas hung in the balance. Just a few more feet and he would be off of this ice. Chad didn't notice the large man skating towards him. They collided, and Chad was knocked to the ground.

"Hey, you're not supposed to be skating that way!" the man yelled as he skated away. Chad was disoriented from the fall and struggled to get up, his hands sliding uselessly on the ice. Realizing that time was wasting, Chad crawled as best he could instead. Patrons yelled at him as they jumped over and skated around him. An elderly lady may have fallen, but Chad didn't have time for this. He reached the wall and pulled himself up and over to solid ground. Chad waddled as fast as he could towards the mechanical room door and grabbed the handle, but it refused to move! Whoever was inside had locked himself in. Chad pounded the door with his fists.

"Open up you jerk!" he screamed. He could hear faint laughter coming from inside. He was being mocked! He had to find the Noid and tell him what was going on. Then they'd show him!

Chad took a quick look around. The Noid was still nowhere to be found; however, something strange was happening. White gas was coming out of the vents and filling the building. It had a distinct odor to it. Chad recognized it immediately: Domino's pizza! The other skaters noticed it too, but something was wrong. Everyone stopped skating and started to become incredible angry. People were grunting and yelling, and others started throwing things. After a few minutes, everyone stopped and looked at Chad. They began to walk towards him!

"Guys? What's wrong?" Chad asked meekly, as he began to back away from the crowd. But nobody would answer him; they only continued to move closer.

"Stay away from me or you'll be sorry!" Chad yelled. He started backing up faster, but there was only so much he could do with his ice skates on. He backed into a bench and fell to the ground. This was the opportunity the crowd was looking for as they closed in on him.

Chad shut his eyes and screamed.

GAME HINT

For the pizza eating contest, pick a number to eat those pizzas. Press left to pick a number to the left, right to pick a number to the right, and so forth. Happy eating!

Chapter 7

Chad was too busy screaming to notice the Noid fighting his way to him. The Noid made short work of the insane crowd, throwing some to the side and attacking those who refused to go down with various martial arts. He picked Chad up and handed him his shoes.

“Why does everyone hate me?!” Chad cried.

“It’s not you, it’s the gas,” the Noid replied. “I’ll explain later, but first we need to get out of here. Did you see who did this?”

“There was a man in a coat,” Chad said, trying to regain his composure. He pointed to the mechanical room door. “He went in there. I couldn’t get it to open. He must have locked it.”

The Noid grabbed the handle and tried to open the door, but as Chad said, it wouldn’t budge. The people who had been knocked over by the Noid were beginning to get up again, and seemed to be even angrier than before.

“I think I can get this door open, but I need you to distract our assailants,” the Noid said, digging through a pocket in his suit. He pulled out a lock pick and began to work on the door. The crowd loomed over Chad. He had to think of something, and fast. Suddenly he had an idea. A perfect, brilliant idea! He would tell the crowd some of his hilarious jokes. When Chad wasn’t eating pizza or scoring his Nintendos, he was reading plenty of joke books, which he checked out from his local library. He would follow his mom around the house, telling her every joke that he had learned. He knew that it probably made her day, and now he’d get these people laughing in no time!

“Hey guys, I’ve got a few jokes for you!” The crowd stopped and looked at him. “What do you get when you cross an apple and AAAAAAH!”

Chad ducked as a large man took a swing at his head. Jokes were not the answer to this problem at all!

He reached into his pockets to try to find something that could help him. He pulled out a handful of change and tossed it at the man. The coins bounced off of his face, and only seemed to enrage him further. He found some lint and tried to toss it, but it just floated to the ground. He searched his back pocket and felt something in there that might do the trick. Of course, he thought. His yo-yo! Chad unraveled the string and

twirled the yo-yo as fast as he could. Once it was as fast as it could go, he swung it at the man. The yo-yo hit him right between the eyes, knocking him unconscious. The crowd moved in to fill the space left by the man, who was now lying on the ground. Chad continued his assault, knocking each person on the head one by one, dodging any incoming attacks. Soon he had incapacitated each and every one of his attackers. He turned to the Noid.

“I did it!” he yelled. “I knocked them all out!”

“Excellent job, Chad,” the Noid replied. “And just in time. I believe that I’ve figured this lock out.” The Noid gave one final turn of the lock pick, pushing the door open. Inside, there was no one to be found. A window was wide open; the suspect must have climbed out to make his escape.

“It looks like we’re too late,” the Noid said, leaning out of the window. “We’d better get moving.”

“What about everyone here?” Chad asked.

“The effects of the gas should go away soon. This open window should help as well.”

“The gas? What did the gas do? Why did it smell like pizza?”

“The gas was a project that Domino’s military division had been working on as part of a contract with the government. They wanted something that could be used to help ease the political unrest in Panama a few years ago. It uses the unique qualities of delicious Domino’s pizza to greatly increase a person’s hunger, causing one’s blood sugar to drop rapidly. This causes the affected person to become extremely cranky, even violently so. I thought that we had properly disposed of all of the remaining gas by selling it to the Middle East, but apparently our thief managed to get a hold of some of it.”

“Why weren’t you affected?” Chad asked.

“I’ve been subjected to that kind of gas and worse during my intensive training.”

“Why wasn’t *I* affected?”

“You’re the number one connoisseur of Domino’s pizza. Your palate cannot be so easily fooled by an imitator.”

This explanation made perfect sense to Chad. “So what now?”

The Noid hopped out of the window onto the grass outside. “I believe that our suspect continued this way on foot.” The Noid pointed ahead to McKinley Park.

“Then we’d better get going,” Chad said, climbing outside. “Will the people inside be okay?”

“They’ll be fine,” the Noid replied. “I’ve called in the Domino’s Task Force. The gas will be out of their systems soon. A few bandages for their heads and a couple of therapy sessions and they’ll all be as good as new.”

Chad and the Noid walked together, away from the ice rink and toward the park. Hopefully they were not too late.

Chapter 8

McKinley Park was named after General Robert McKinley, who bravely held back the rebel forces at the edge of Bend during the Civil War. Today, however, things were anything but civil. Hungry, enraged citizens were wandering the walkways, looking for a way to let out their aggressions. Chad and the Noid arrived at the entrance to the park, and could see what they would be up against. The two of them hid behind a bush as they tried to figure out their next move.

“Oh no, it looks like everyone here has been gassed too,” Chad said, grabbing his yo-yo. He was prepared to fight his way through if he had to.

“It appears so, Chad. I wonder where the culprit could have gone.” The Noid touched a button on the side of his head, causing a pair of binoculars to form in front of his eyes. Slowly poking his head up over the bush, he took a look around. Blood sugar zombies were all over the park, but the culprit was nowhere to be found. He adjusted the knob on the side of the binoculars to see even further. He could now see the whole way to the other end of the park. There was an apartment complex across the street. The Noid could see someone climbing the fire escape towards the roof. It was the pizza thief!

“It’s just as I feared! He’s already out of the park! We have to hurry!” the Noid said, jumping up.

“Careful, they’ll see us,” Chad whispered, motioning for the Noid to get back behind cover.

“There’s no time to hide. We need to get to the other side of the park and quickly. I may have just what we need in here somewhere.” The Noid began to search his suit.

Chad looked over the bush into the park to see if they had been spotted. Sure enough, a few of the pizza zombies were heading towards them right now!

“Mr. Noid, we need to hurry!” Chad said, turning around. The Noid was holding a skateboard.

“Here we are. This will get us to the other side of the park in no time at all,” the Noid said, hopping on. The angry park visitors were now right next to them and looked like they were ready to attack. “Quickly, Chad. Climb aboard so we can make our escape!”

“Wait, where did the skateboard come from?”

“It was part of my suit. Hurry!”

“But how...”

“There’s no time, Chad!” The Noid’s usually cool demeanor was beginning to crack. Chad ran over and jumped on the skateboard behind the Noid.

“Hold on tight,” the Noid said, pushing a button on the skateboard with his foot. A pair of rocket engines appeared and flames shot out as the skateboard was propelled forward. Chad held back a scream as they accelerated along the sidewalk towards the other end of the park. They were going so fast that he could hardly even see where they were going. Hopefully the Noid was in control of this thing.

“Brace yourself!” the Noid yelled. He hit another button with his foot, causing the skateboard to jump in the air, narrowly missing the statue of General McKinley. As they landed, a group of gassed park goers appeared. The Noid made the skateboard jump again while Chad swung his yo-yo, hitting a few in the head as they went past for good measure.

“How exciting,” Chad thought. “This is almost like one of my videoed games.”

Before he knew it, they were at the other entrance to the park. The skateboard came to a stop, and Chad hopped off to catch his breath. They were clear from any attackers now. There was no way that they could possibly have caught up with them yet. He looked at the Noid.

“The skateboard is right back where it belongs, in case we need it later,” the Noid said. “Now, let’s make haste to the fire escape.”

Chad and the Noid ran across the street and over to the fire escape. The ladder had been left down from the culprit’s trip, so they began to climb. As they climbed, Chad began to realize that he was afraid of heights. He began to get dizzy as he looked down at the five stories below him. “Focus, Chad,” he told himself, moving his eyes upward towards the final few stories. He wasn’t about to let everyone down just because of a little bit of fear. He was Chad Jenkins, hero of Bend, and he was prepared for anything.

Finally they reached the top. The rooftop looked like nobody had been up there in years. Old, rusty machines rattled as they provided cooling to the residents below. Chad was out of breath, so he sat down to regain his composure.

“Let’s not dawdle,” the Noid said. “We need to make sure that the culprit does not get away. We’ve got him this time.”

Suddenly, a net covered the Noid, knocking him to the ground. Looking closely, Chad could see that it was actually made of pizza cheese.

“Oh, do you now?” a mysterious voice replied from somewhere on the roof.

“Show yourself!” the Noid said. Chad jumped up, ready for action.

“Very well.” A figure stepped out from behind one of the machines. He recognized him immediately.

It was the Noid!

Chapter 9

Chad stared at the Noid. At least it looked like the Noid; the only difference was that the new Noid was wearing green. His new best friend who was also the Noid was on the ground, covered in a net of pizza cheese. But if he was the Noid, and the other guy was the Noid, then...

“What is going on?!” Chad yelled. “There are two Noids?!”

“He didn’t tell you?” the Noid doppelganger sneered. “He needs your help, and yet he won’t even tell you the truth. I’m not surprised.”

“Don’t listen to him,” the real (?) Noid said. “He’ll try to get into your head and manipulate you until you’re wrapped around his little finger!”

“Silence!” the other Noid yelled, throwing a slice of pepperoni at the Noid’s head.

“Stop wasting pizza ingredients and tell me where the pizzas are, you jerk!” Chad swung his yo-yo, hitting the other Noid in the side of the head. He dropped the handful of pepperonis he was holding.

“Insolent whelp!” he yelled, pulling out what looked like a blunderbuss and firing it at Chad. Chad screamed as a cheese net covered his body, knocking him to the ground. He struggled to break free, but it had hardened immediately. Chad was completely encased in delicious Domino’s mozzarella. The smell made his mouth water. This was the closest he had been to pizza all day. If only he could...well, it was worth a try. Chad started to chew on the mozzarella net. He was in heaven.

“Why did you steal the pizza? What diabolical plan are you hatching this time, you fiend?” the Noid asked.

“Well,” other Noid replied, “since you’ve so foolishly fallen right into my trap, and are doomed at this point, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you my plan. I stole your pizzas to prove that the world doesn’t need the Noid. You failed to protect the one thing you swore to always protect, and now you’ll be seen as the fraud you are!”

“And how do you plan to prove that? As soon as I break free I’ll have the Domino’s Task Force here to apprehend you and the pizzas on the double!”

“Do you think I’d be stupid enough to have all of the pizzas in my possession?” the other Noid replied. “I’ve hidden them all over the city. You’ll never find them all in time!”

“In time for what?”

“In time for the fireworks!” The other Noid let out a sinister laugh. “All of the pizzas are strapped with timed explosives. Tonight they will all go off, marking the end of Domino’s Pizza forever in Bend, Oregon.”

The Noid let out a gasp. This was worse than any scenario he had imagined. Wrapped up in cheese on a roof, waiting for pizzas to explode around town was something that he did not have a contingency plan for. But what could he do to stop this? He was powerless.

“Speechless for once?” the other Noid asked. “That’s a surprise, though I can’t blame you now that you’ve realized how hopeless your efforts have been up to this point. I hate to run, but I’d like to watch my triumph from a more comfortable place.”

“Run this!” A yo-yo flew through the air and hit the other Noid right on the ear. Chad stood before him, having eaten his way through his cheesy restraints.

“Owwww! How did you escape?!”

“You made one mistake, scumbag: you tried to trap me with delicious Domino’s Pizza ingredients!”

“You should have stayed on the floor, you punk!” the other Noid yelled, pulling out his cheese blunderbuss. Chad was prepared this time. With a flick of his wrist, he shot the yo-yo right into the blunderbuss. The other Noid yelped as it flew through the air and off of the roof, hitting the street below.

Chad stepped forward, yo-yo swinging. He was ready to end this once and for all. “Tell me where the pizzas are, or you’ll regret it!”

The other Noid was furious. “I’ll never tell! We’ll finish this conversation later, once you’ve tasted utter defeat!” He pulled a smoke bomb from his suit and threw it onto the ground. A puff of white smoke exploded outward, blinding Chad. He coughed as he tried to find the other Noid, but when the smoke cleared, he was nowhere to be found. Chad ran over to the actual Noid, who was still encased in cheese.

“Well done, lad,” the Noid said. “We’ve got to hurry before all of the pizzas are destroyed. Can you help me out of this bind?”

“Of course! Leave it to me!” Eating all of the cheese from his own net had only helped to work up Chad’s appetite even more. He took a bite out of the Noid’s cheese net.

“Please be careful,” the Noid said. “I’d hate to be missing a finger when you’re done.”

Minutes later, Chad was happily fed and the Noid was free. “Thank you Chad. Now let’s go find those pizzas!”

“No way!” Chad said. “Not until you tell me what’s going on. Why are there two Noids? Why does he want to ruin Domino’s Pizza?”

The Noid sighed. “I didn’t want to dredge up the past, but I suppose I owe you an explanation for what you’ve just witnessed. Indeed, it is time that I tell you who our culprit is. In just a minute.”

GAME HINT

Has your mom had a rough day? Have her
order a hot, delicious Domino's pizza for dinner
instead of slaving over a hot stove all night!

Chapter 10

Chad stared at the Noid.

“Okay,” the Noid said. “Now it is time to tell you who our culprit is. He is a man I’ve known for a long time. The pizza thief is none other than my arch-enemy, Dark Noid!”

Chad gasped. “Dark Noid?! He sounds dangerous!”

“He’s the most dangerous man out there,” the Noid replied. “And it’s my responsibility to stop him.”

“Your responsibility? Why?”

“He was my apprentice. I was supposed to train him to be the Noid once I retired. But things didn’t work out that way.”

“Train him? But he’s a crazy jerk! Why would you want to train him to do anything?”

“He wasn’t always like that,” the Noid said. “He was an extremely talented operative. He was always a bit reckless, and his methods were more brash than what I would have used, but he had so much potential.”

“So what happened?” Chad asked.

The Noid sighed heavily. For a moment it looked like he was lost in thought, but he quickly regained focus. “We were sent on a mission to one of our pizza sauce plants in Madrid. A thief had broken in and stolen the master sauce recipe; he had planned to sell it on the black market. There are people from all over the world who would love to know just how Domino’s makes their perfect sauce, and we couldn’t allow that to happen.

“We arrived just in time to capture him before he had a chance to leave the plant. My plan was to sneak around and find a way to get behind him, but Dark Noid grew impatient as usual and approached him head on. The ensuing struggle ended with the two of them fighting high above one of the sauce tanks. Dark Noid tackled the thief and they both went over the edge of the catwalk. I had to make a choice between saving the sauce recipe and saving Dark Noid. The very first thing that you are taught as a Domino’s agent is that Domino’s Pizza is priority number one, so I had no choice but to rescue the sauce recipe. I tried my best to get to Dark Noid in time, but it was too late; he fell into the sauce tank and

nearly drowned. He was in the hospital for weeks, and was fired for his reckless behavior. He has always blamed me for putting the sauce recipe ahead of him that day, and now he's back for revenge. If only I had trained him better, none of this would have happened."

Chad put his hand on the Noid's shoulder. "You did everything you were supposed to do. It's his fault that he ran off without you. He's just mad because he can't face how stupid he is."

"Perhaps you're right," the Noid replied. "Regardless, we must stop those pizzas from exploding. We need a plan and quickly, or else Domino's will have a public relations nightmare on their hands."

"Plus I'll never get my lifetime supply of pizza!" Chad added.

"Well, yes, I suppose that's the case as well."

Chad closed his eyes and tried to concentrate, but the thought of delicious Domino's pizza was too distracting. It was almost...almost if he could smell it. In fact, he *could* smell it!

"I can smell pizza!" Chad yelled.

"I smell nothing. Are you sure, Chad?"

"I'm positive! It's Domino's pizza. With sausage, black olives and mushrooms!"

"Amazing!" the Noid said. "Our genetic research has hinted at the existence of a Pizza Gene, the missing link between man and pizza, but they were never able to find proof. Perhaps...*you* have the gene. We were very wise to have chosen you for this mission, Chad. Very wise indeed."

Chad blushed.

"Can you pinpoint the origin of the pizzas?" the Noid asked. "Try to focus."

Chad took a deep breath through his nose. "I think they're below us."

"On the street?"

"No, even lower than that. The sewers!"

"Well then, we had better get down from this roof and retrieve them."

Once they reached the street level, the Noid used his superior strength to lift the nearest manhole and they climbed into the sewer. The smell was unbearable, save for the scent of Domino's pizza, which was even stronger than before.

“This way!” Chad said, walking towards the scent.

“Please watch your step,” the Noid warned him, pulling out a flashlight.

Chad turned a corner and there, sitting right in front of him, was a pile of Domino’s pizzas! “I found them!” he yelled, running towards the pile.

“Stay back!” the Noid warned him. “Need I remind you that there is a bomb somewhere near these pizzas?” Chad backed away as the Noid pulled out some wire cutters. He searched the pile of pizzas and found the bomb wedged between several boxes, beeping softly. Using his expert bomb-defusing skills, he made several snips with the wire cutters until the beeping stopped. “There, it looks like these pizzas have been saved. I’ll call my men in to pick them up. These pizzas will be delivered to their rightful owners in no time at all.”

Chad couldn’t believe it. Thanks to them, all of those families would soon be eating Domino’s pizza, probably once they were transferred into some dry boxes. This was easy! They’d have all of the pizzas back in no time!

“The smell is driving me crazy,” the Noid said after he had made his call. “Let’s climb out of here.” The two of them climbed to the street. The Noid wiped his feet on a nearby box.

“Where to next?” Chad asked.

“We’ll need to travel through town while you use your gift to locate more pizzas.”

“How will we do that?” Chad asked. “We’re running out of time!”

The Noid pressed a button on his head. His ears began to spin faster and faster until they were spinning as fast as helicopter blades!

“I suppose we’ll just have to fly!”

Chapter 11

Chad and the Noid flew through the air over Bend, the wind blowing through Chad's hair as he held onto the Noid as tightly as he could. For a moment, looking down at the city from this height, all of their problems seemed so insignificant. Chad felt like maybe he should spend less time playing his Nintendo arcade cassettes and more time outside, seeing all that nature had to offer.

"Have you found anything?" the Noid asked.

Chad had completely forgotten why they were up there in the first place! He was supposed to be using his pizza gene to find more of the missing pizzas. And here he was, goofing off, thinking about nature. He closed his eyes and sniffed as hard as he could. He could almost see the pizza materialize in his mind's eye, like some sort of sixth pizza sense. He could sense a large group of pizzas over by the waterfront. He pointed towards a nearby yacht. "There's pizza on that boat!" he said. The Noid descended towards the yacht so they could better assess the situation. There were a lot of people on the boat, and music was playing loudly.

"It appears that there is a party on this yacht tonight," the Noid said. "If we land on the yacht and tell them what is happening, they may panic, and people could get hurt. We'll need to sneak aboard and go undercover until we can determine the pizzas' location."

The Noid flew to the back of the yacht where nobody was gathered and silently landed. Chad and the Noid quickly ran into a nearby supply closet to plan their next move.

"We'll need to split up so we can quickly search the boat for any sign of the pizzas," the Noid said. "I'll disguise myself as a waiter." He pulled off his body suit, revealing a waiter's uniform.

"Awesome!" Chad said. What about me?

"I've got the perfect disguise for you."

* * *

On the top deck of the yacht, guests were having a good time. Music was playing, friends were talking, and hors d'oeuvres were being enjoyed. Everyone was having so much fun, that nobody noticed a box sitting next to the wall. A box that contained Chad Jenkins.

"A box," Chad mumbled to himself. "He gets to be a waiter and do cool spy stuff, and I have to curl up in a box. No fair!" This was not the contribution Chad thought that he would be making. There weren't even any holes; all he could do was listen to muffled voices. Two women were standing right next to the box having a conversation.

"This is a great party, but I'm getting hungry."

"Dinner is going to be served in about twenty minutes."

"Great. Do you know what we're having?"

"I think we're having hot, delicious Domino's pizza. I saw a bunch of it being delivered to the kitchen when we first got here."

Domino's pizza? That was it! Chad had figured out the pizza's location using the power of the box.

"Yes!" Chad yelled. One of the women screamed, startled by Chad's outburst.

"Something's in that box!" she exclaimed.

"Probably a rat," the other woman replied. "Let's see if we can get the help to take care of it." The two wandered off. Chad had to get out of there quickly, before his cover was blown. He lifted the box slightly and took a look around. A few feet away was an air duct that looked to be his size. He crept towards it, careful to not attract any more attention. He pulled the grill to the duct open, climbed inside, and closed it, leaving the box behind.

Chad began to crawl down the duct, looking for another exit. The duct was dusty and had clearly never been cleaned. Soon the light from behind him was gone and it was pitch black. Chad was beginning to worry that he would never find his way out of the duct, when suddenly the duct dropped downward, sending him into a free fall. A light appeared below him and was approaching quickly. Chad screamed as he crashed through the grill and onto the floor.

It took a moment for the room to stop spinning, but Chad was able to quickly stand up and check his surroundings. He was in the kitchen! And over on the counter was a stack of Domino's pizzas! He did it! Now the Noid just had to walk over and disable the bomb! Chad broke into a cold sweat. The Noid wasn't with him this time, and if he went

looking for him, he might get caught. He was going to have to do this himself.

Chad took a look around. The Noid had used wire cutters, but there were none to be found in the kitchen. The closest he could find was a pair of scissors. They would have to do.

The bomb was sitting on top of the pizzas this time, beeping the same soft beep as the other one. Chad took a look at it. A nest of wires protruded from it. Chad closed his eyes and cut something. The beeping stopped! Chad sighed with relief. He picked it up and took a look at it. Suddenly, the beeping started up again, only louder and faster. It was about to detonate! Chad ran to the nearest window and threw the bomb into the water. It exploded, firing a plume of water into the air and causing the boat to rock violently. He could hear the screams of the guests above. This was exactly the panic he was trying to avoid, but at least the pizzas were okay.

Chad took the stairs to the deck this time, hoping that he would run into the Noid, but instead, the entire party was staring at him. An older man in the fanciest suit Chad had ever seen approached him. "You're in deep trouble, young man," he said. "You crash my party and then you try to sink my boat? I'll make sure you're in jail until you're an old man!"

"Wait!" a familiar voice yelled. The Noid pushed his way through the crowd to Chad and the man. "Sir, I may appear to be a waiter, but I am none other than the Noid with the Domino's Pizza Task Force. This young man is on an important pizza mission, and has in fact saved your lives. You should be thanking him."

"Is that so?" the man asked. "I suppose I owe you an apology, son. But you scared us all half to death."

"Sir," the Noid said. "As an apology for your party being disrupted, I would like to offer the gift of hot, delicious Domino's pizza. There is a whole pile of pizza in your kitchen that we are donating to the party." Everyone on deck cheered.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Noid. And you, son, what's your name?"

"Chad Jenkins, sir."

"Chad, you're welcome back anytime."

"We'd best be going," the Noid said. Chad held on as the Noid's propeller ears fired up. The party hardly noticed that they had left as they began to dig into all of the delicious Domino's pizza.

Chapter 12

Chad and the Noid stood in line for the Red Apple Circus. It was in Bend for this week only, and they had drawn quite a crowd. They weren't there just to see the show, though; Chad had picked up a strong pizza scent in the area as they flew by during their search for the remaining pizzas. They had to be here somewhere, and the only way to find them was to pay admission. The Noid paid for their tickets with his Platinum Domino's Visa, and they decided to take a look around the grounds before the show started.

This circus was like any other. A bald man with a dumbbell walked past them, there were monkeys and elephants everywhere, and a calliope played a joyful tune. But as far as they could see, there were no pizzas to be found. The Noid was feeling nostalgic. "I haven't been to a real circus since my parents took me to Piccadilly Circus as a child. This really brings back memories. Let's get some popcorn while we plan our next move." They found a concession stand and got in line. Chad was never really a fan of popcorn; it was so bland, and didn't have any sauce or delicious, gooey cheese on it like pizza did. He decided to play along if it made the Noid happy though; plus, the Noid would probably eat Chad's popcorn if he didn't want it.

The line was taking a lot longer than Chad expected. "Hopefully we get our popcorn soon. We're running out of time before the show starts," he said.

"Not to worry, Chad. I'm sure it will only take a moment longer."

At this rate, Chad thought, there was no way they were going to find all of those pizzas. He was going to have to make the best use of his time as possible. Finally, Chad and the Noid arrived at the front of the line. The man at the concession stand looked like he was having a long, busy day. In fact, he had probably heard a lot of conversations standing there for so long.

"Can I take your order?" the man asked.

“How about I ask you a few questions instead?” Chad replied.

“Listen, I don’t..”

“Have you heard any talk about a large amount of pizzas being stored here?”

“Kid, I..”

“I’m with Domino’s Pizza and if you don’t tell me everything you know, there are going to be serious consequences! I could have you arrested! Now tell me where the pizzas are right now!”

The man’s face was red. “Kid, I have an entire line of people behind you that I need to serve before the show starts. I have been up and on my feet since four o’clock this morning. I don’t have time for you or your pizza questions! Give me your order and move along!”

Chad fell silent. The Noid gave him a look and ordered their popcorn. It was quickly given to them and they went on their way. Just as Chad thought, the popcorn was gross. If only they were selling Domino’s pizza instead.

“May I have your attention?” a voice on the intercom said. “The show will begin in ten minutes. Please make your way into the tent and find your seats.”

“So much for finding the pizzas before the show,” the Noid said. The two of them went inside and sat down.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the ringmaster said once the show had begun, “tonight we are proud to present a brand new act, the likes of which have never been seen before, thanks to an anonymous donation. Our world-famous trapeze artists, known for their death-defying feats, will perform their entire act without a conventional net. Instead, their net will be two hundred pizzas!” A spotlight shone underneath the trapeze, revealing a pile of hot, delicious Domino’s pizzas.

“There they are!” Chad yelled. “After the show ends we can just tell them who we are and get them back.”

“Have you forgotten?” the Noid said. “There is a bomb in there somewhere. Those pizzas might be destroyed unless we deactivate it as soon as possible.” The Noid turned on his head binoculars and took a look at the pizzas. He could see the bomb, but it was different from the rest. “This bomb can only be activated or deactivated with a remote,” he said. “We’ll need to find the remote before we can do anything.”

“Is that it?” Chad asked, pointing up at the trapeze. Sure enough, between the two platforms, the remote dangled from rope attached to the top of the tent.

“We need to get up there,” the Noid said as they ran towards the platform.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” one of the security guards asked as they approached the ladder to the platform.

“This is official Domino’s Pizza business,” the Noid said. He flashed his badge and the guard backed down. Being an agent had so many perks, Chad thought. They both climbed the ladder and stood at the edge of the platform.

“We’re going to need to work together,” the Noid said. “Please trust me.”

“I’ll always trust you,” Chad said.

“Good. Grab onto my feet.” Chad did what he was told and the Noid grabbed onto the trapeze. He swung out over the pizzas with Chad hanging on for dear life. They approached the remote.

“Grab it, Chad!”

Chad reached out with one hand and grabbed it. He pushed the big red button under the word DEACTIVATE. “I did it!” he yelled. That’s when Chad noticed his grip on the Noid’s foot begin to loosen.

“I can’t hold on!” Chad said. Suddenly he plummeted to the ground below. He screamed as the lights of the tent spun around him. Was this the end?

SPLAT!

Chad felt a warmth all around him. And the smell was delicious. He was covered in pizza. Not just any pizza, but delicious Domino’s pizza. It had broken his fall and saved his life! He stood up.

“I’m okay!” he yelled. The audience cheered.

“Well done, Chad!” the Noid said, running towards him. “I’ll have my men dust these pizzas off and send them to their rightful homes.”

“I think I need some new clothes,” Chad said, looking down at himself and seeing that he was covered in sauce and cheese.

“Don’t worry, Chad, I have just the thing,” the Noid replied, opening a briefcase. “I’ve been saving this until you were ready, and I think that time is now.”

It was Chad's very own Noid costume!

GAME HINT

Domino's is turning 30! Help celebrate the big 3-0! Order any pizza and get a second medium pizza for just 30 cents!

Chapter 13

Chad couldn't wait to try his new Noid suit on. He ran into a dressing room in the circus tent and went to it. The suit was a bit tricky to get on at first; it was only one piece, so he had to get his legs in first and work the rest of it up and around his body. After a few minutes of struggling, he managed to get his arms in and lift the top over his head. He took a look in the mirror. Before him stood a kid dressed in all red save for the white on his hands, with rabbit ears, and a chest adorned with a large letter N. It was the most beautiful thing that Chad had ever seen. His mom would be so proud of him when she saw him and heard about the events that led to this magic moment.

"Chad, will you be ready soon?" the Noid asked from outside. In Chad's joy, he hadn't realized how long he had been staring at himself in the mirror. He opened the door and came out. "We certainly look like a team now," the Noid said. "I should teach you about some of the suit's capabilities."

The Noid went on for quite some time, explaining all of the things that the suit could do. From head binoculars to radio transceivers, climbing gear to roller skates, it seemed like the suit could do pretty much anything that Chad could imagine. He had a hard time remembering most of the things that the Noid was telling him. It was just too much to process in so short a time.

"...which is why you should never do that no matter what," the Noid concluded. "Chad, are you still listening?"

"Um, yeah," Chad said, snapping out of his daze. "So when do we get to find some more pizzas?"

"Soon, Chad. But first I want to make sure that you can operate your flying mechanism."

"Sure, no problem," Chad replied. "Just hit this thing here, right?" He pushed a button on his head and the ears on his suit began to spin, just like the Noid's had.

“Well done Chad. Now take it for a spin and meet me back here when you’re done.”

Chad slowly lifted into the air as he familiarized himself with the controls. Soon the Noid and everyone at the circus looked like ants. He flew around the neighborhood, past apartment buildings and trees. Flying through the air while hanging onto the Noid was great, but this was something else altogether.

Chad took a deep breath. He could smell the many scents of Bend: the smoke from the factories, the salt from the ocean, pizza...

There was pizza nearby! If Chad’s amazing pizza detection skills were to be believed, the smell was coming from a nearby abandoned neighborhood. Chad could just drop in, grab the pizzas and bring them back before anyone noticed he was missing.

He lowered himself down between the buildings and looked through windows to see if he could find the pizzas. He flew up and down a few blocks, but did not find anything. Suddenly he noticed a single light coming through the window of one building: an empty warehouse on the next block. Chad flew over to the window and took a look. Sure enough, in the center of the warehouse was a huge pile of delicious Domino’s pizzas! He had done it once again! If only the Noid were here, he could call his people in and deliver the pizzas to the families of Bend. Chad used his suit to call the Noid.

“Chad, where on Earth are you?” the Noid asked.

“I’m at an abandoned warehouse nearby. I found pizzas!”

“Excellent work, Chad. I’ll use the tracking beacon on your suit to find your location. Have you seen any sign of the bomb?”

“Not yet, but I’ll keep looking.”

“Very well. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Chad hit the button to hang up the phone. Suddenly, his ears began to slow down. He had hit the wrong button! The ears came to a complete stop, and Chad began to fall. He screamed as he plummeted downward, landing in an open dumpster below. The impact of the fall caused the lid to close, surrounding Chad in total darkness.

Chapter 14

Chad was all alone in the dark. He was surrounded by the garbage bags that broke his fall, and the smell was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He struggled to stand upright in the sea of garbage bags, and finally managed to push the dumpster lid open. He climbed out of the dumpster and fell to the ground.

He turned on his phone. "Noid, can you hear me?" he asked. "I had an accident but I think I'm okay. Hello?" Chad couldn't hear anything on the other end. Maybe it had been damaged during the fall, he thought. He would have to get the Noid to take a look at it when he got there. In the meantime, Chad decided that he was going to fly around, since the streets were a little scary. He hit the button on his head. Nothing happened. It looked like all of the gadgets on the suit had stopped working, Chad was on his own for the time being. Hopefully the Noid would get there soon.

Suddenly, Chad saw a silhouette approach him from a few feet away. As the silhouette drew closer, he could see that it was a bearded man, dressed in old clothes.

"Excuse me, young man," the man said. "I don't mean to be a bother, but do you by any chance have a quarter or any other change that I could have?"

Chad screamed at the top of his lungs and ran as fast as he could into an alleyway. Unfortunately the alley led to a dead end. Chad put his back against the wall and saw that the man was following him.

"Young man? Are you okay? I'm sorry that I startled you."

Chad's blood ran cold as he frantically looked for a way out of this terrible situation. The man grew closer still. Try as he might, Chad couldn't think his way out of this one. All he could do was wait for the end.

“Not so fast, rogue!” A familiar voice echoed through the alley. The Noid lowered down from the sky and landed between Chad and the bearded man. “You leave this young man alone and be on your way.”

“Sir, I don’t mean any harm,” the frightening man replied. “Your friend there was scared and I wanted to make sure he was alright. I really wasn’t...”

“I said begone!” The Noid broke into one of his many martial arts stances and the horrifying man ran off. The Noid turned to Chad. “Are you alright?”

“I...I’m fine,” Chad said, wiping a tear from his cheek. “Who was that man?”

“Just a homeless man. He has no money, so he sees fit to terrify innocent people to satiate his never-ending lust for riches.”

“If he needs money so badly, why doesn’t he just stop being poor?” Chad asked.

“Nobody knows, Chad. Nobody knows.”

“I think my suit is broken. None of the buttons work after I fell.”

“You fell? Did you try to hang up the phone while flying?”

“How did you know?”

“That was the very last thing I told you before you took off. Never hang up the phone while flying, no matter what!”

Chad’s face turned red. He kind of remembered the Noid saying that, now that he mentioned it.

“No matter,” the Noid said. “I’m just glad you’re safe. Your mother would never forgive Domino’s if we didn’t get you home in one piece. It would be a PR nightmare to be sure. Anyway, show me where the pizzas are.”

Chad led the Noid to the warehouse and the stack of pizzas. Another remote-controlled bomb was attached to it, just like the one at the circus.

“Let’s see if we can find the remote,” the Noid said.

The two of them searched the entire warehouse. Every room was turned inside-out, but they found no sign of the detonator.

“I don’t get it,” the Noid said. “Where on Earth could it be?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt again,” a familiar voice said. “But I may know the whereabouts of the item that you are searching for.” The hideous homeless man opened his coat and pulled out the detonator.

“Where did you get that?” the Noid demanded.

“I found it earlier. I thought I might be able to sell it for enough money for one night’s room and board, but if it’s important to you, I’ll gladly...”

“After him!” Chad yelled. Chad and the Noid bolted towards the homeless man, who began to run away instinctively. He was not incredibly fast, and the Noid quickly tackled the monster. He forced the detonator out of his hand and hit the button to deactivate the bomb.

“Take that, you freak!” Chad yelled.

“Well said,” the Noid replied. “My men will be here shortly to collect these pizzas. I’m sending someone from the engineering division to look at your suit as well. It should be fully operational in no time.”

“And what about him?” Chad asked, pointing at the homeless man, who was still wheezing from the tackle.

“We’ll bring him in for interrogation,” the Noid replied. “I’m sure he’s in cahoots with Dark Noid.”

“Dark what?” the homeless man asked. “Sir, I have no idea what either of you are talking about. Please...”

“Don’t make this any worse on yourself than it needs to be,” the Noid interrupted. “I’d save your breath for the interrogation. I have a feeling you’ll be doing a lot of talking tonight.”

The Domino’s Task Force arrived and hauled the homeless man away. The pizzas were loaded onto delivery trucks.

“How are we doing?” Chad asked.

“Not bad at all,” the Noid replied. “Only a few pizzas are still unaccounted for. I believe that our mission will soon come to an end.”

Chapter 15

It had been a long couple of hours. Chad and the Noid had combed the entire town, looking for the remaining pizzas that had been stolen by Dark Noid. Their search led them to all sorts of exiting places. One pile of pizzas was found in the middle of the local water park; Chad got to ride all of the slides until he finally found them in the locker room. Another group of pizzas was hidden in the Bend Museum of Natural History, stacked to look like the bones of a dinosaur. Chad and the Noid both learned so many things about dinosaurs during that adventure. The most recent pizzas were found in the Bend Tar Pits. Those pizzas were going to need a good scrubbing, but they would be delivered soon. Nothing they had seen so far, however, would prepare them for their next location: a box factory.

Not just any box factory, though: it was a factory that specialized in making boxes for Tomestone Pizza, a frozen pizza that was found in grocery stores nationwide. A Domino's representative arriving to search their factory would normally be a source of tension, but under the Pizza Assistance Act passed by the United Pizza Nations, pizza chains were required to assist each other in the handling of pizza terrorism.

Chad and the Noid approached the entrance to the factory and were greeted by the plant manager, Charles Wormley.

"Well hello there," Mr. Wormley sneered. "I got your call. It sounds like your employees are out of control these days."

"Ex-employee," the Noid said, shaking his hand. "Not to worry. We've got this entirely under control."

"Do you now? It sounds like this ex-employee is causing you all sorts of trouble. Maybe you should do a better job with your security. You have my support as per the PAA, but I can't just have rogue Domino's employees breaking into my factory, hiding pizzas and planting bombs. This could become a liability."

“I understand,” the Noid said, trying to mask his frustration. “We’ll be out of your hair as soon as we can.”

Mr. Wormley looked at Chad. “And who is this? A *child* in a Noid suit? I see that your hiring practices haven’t exactly gotten any better.”

“My name is Chad,” Chad replied. “I’m better than you think. I have the pizza gene!”

“The pizza gene?!” Mr. Wormley scoffed. “Impossible! Noid, take your kid inside, find your pizzas, and get out of my factory.”

“Very well,” the Noid replied.

“What’s his problem?” Chad asked as they entered the factory.

“He’s always had it out for us. It’s probably because Domino’s pizza is so hot and delicious, while Tomestone is a frozen shadow of a real pizza. Sure, you can grab a pizza from the grocery store on the way home from work and pop it in the oven, but you can just as easily order a hot, fresh Domino’s pizza made to order, delivered to your home in the same time it would take to reheat that cardboard frozen pizza with second-rate ingredients. Tomestone pizza is so clearly inferior to Domino’s pizza that Mr. Wormley no doubt realizes this and can’t help but feel resentment towards us since he can never improve the quality of his product to match ours. Remember, Chad, Domino’s pizza is simply the best pizza money can buy.”

“How could I forget?” Chad replied, trying not to drool. He could really go for a hot, delicious Domino’s pizza right about now. Rescuing all of these pizzas for everyone else, but not getting to have any himself was almost a form of torture. As soon as Domino’s had all of their pizzas back, he was going to have his mom order a dozen!

They arrived inside the factory, facing a huge conveyor belt. Hundreds of Tomestone boxes passed by, on their way to be filled with frozen pizzas. Chad took a look at the boxes. He could only see three different varieties of pizza: pepperoni, vegetarian and cheese. Unlike Domino’s, with their nearly-infinite variety of ingredient combinations, Tomestone only had three choices. Chad thought he was going to be sick.

“What kind of sick, demented family would subject themselves to this kind of food?” Chad asked the Noid.

“Not sick, Chad,” the Noid replied. “Merely uneducated. It’s amazing what kind of ideas that false advertising can place into the minds of gullible people. That’s why it’s important to stay educated. Pay attention in school so you can make wise pizza-buying choices. If our education department is successful, we may even be adding Domino’s

Pizza-sponsored classes to educate everyone on the proper pizza-selection process. We're trying to pass it through Congress."

The two walked past the conveyor belts into an open area. To their surprise, there was a stack of Domino's pizzas directly in front of them. The bomb was placed right on top.

"What's going on?" the Noid asked.

Mr. Wormley appeared on the catwalk above them. "You've fallen right into my trap, Noid! I'm afraid that you and your little friend will not be making it out of here tonight."

The doors to the factory all shut at once. They were trapped!

GAME HINT

Pizza Code
At the telephone, input the following: 1-800-DOMINOS

Chapter 16

The Noid frantically looked for a way out of the factory. Unfortunately, all of the doors and windows were locked tight.

Mr. Wormley cackled. “Search all you want, but there’s no way out of here.”

“Wormley, what is the meaning of this?” the Noid asked. “This is a serious violation of the Pizza Assistance Act. The United Pizza Nations will punish you for this!”

“It’s a good thing they’ll never find out about it then. You and your friend won’t make it out of here to tell anyone!”

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“Dark Noid has paid me well for my cooperation. Once you’re taken care of, the pizza supply will be destroyed, and Domino’s Pizza will crumble. With high-quality delivery pizza gone forever, Tomestone will rise to take your place. A new era begins tonight, Noid!” Twenty strong-looking men, each carrying a wrench, surrounded Chad and the Noid. “Henchmen, finish them!” Mr. Wormley screamed.

“Stay sharp, Chad,” the Noid said, preparing to subdue the men with his martial arts. Chad brought out his yo-yo and swung it menacingly. The fight did not last long. Between the Noid’s martial arts and Chad’s amazing yo-yo skills, the henchmen didn’t stand a chance. In mere minutes, they were on the ground, nursing their wounds.

“Surrender, Wormley,” the Noid said. “The United Pizza Nations may go easy on you if you cooperate.”

“This isn’t finished, Noid!” Wormley shrieked. “Dark Noid shared your stolen technology with me. I’ve got the formula to your pizza gas. My men in R&D have whipped together our very own version of the gas, using delicious, convenient Tomestone pizza as the base. Let’s see how you handle my henchmen when they’ve got dangerously low blood sugar!”

Mr. Wormley pushed a button on the wall and the room began to fill with a yellow-ish gas. The henchmen stood up and breathed it in, ready to go another round with the man and child who had just humiliated them. But instead of becoming enraged and violent, they grew tired. The men yawned, then slumped back to the floor and fell asleep.

“What?!” Wormley was furious. “How can this be?!”

“You made a fatal mistake, Wormley,” the Noid replied. “Only hot, delicious Domino’s pizza with its fresh, superior ingredients can make a man go insane from low blood sugar. Tomestone pizza has frozen, cheap ingredients that just can’t compare to a piping hot delivery pizza. No wonder your henchmen fell asleep. Your pizza is just too bland!”

Mr. Wormley punched the wall. “Impossible! R&D is getting a pay cut for this! But no matter, I’ll finish you both myself!” Mr. Wormley removed his coat to reveal a blue costume that looked similar to the Noid’s suit. “Dark Noid shared one more piece of technology with me: the blueprints to your Noid suit! I’ve added all sorts of modifications to it to make it even better than yours. It’s time for you to meet the ultimate in pizza suit technology: the Tomestone Original Invention (Do not steal)! Prepare to be crushed by the T.O.I.D.!”

Wormley jumped off the catwalk and landed on the floor of the factory, leaving cracks beneath his feet. Chad swung his yo-yo at his head. Wormley’s left hand transformed into a saw blade and cut the string, causing the yo-yo to fall to the floor.

“Your childish tricks won’t work on me!” Wormley yelled, walking towards him. “Try this on for size!” His right hand turned into a wide slot. A pizza box that had been cut into the shape of a ninja star shot out at Chad. He ducked as it stuck into the wall behind him.

“Avoid the T.O.I.D.!” the Noid yelled to him. He ran towards Wormley and performed a jump kick. His foot connected with Wormley’s head, but he didn’t appear to be affected at all.

“Space-Age materials,” Wormley gloated. “100% immune to your karate. You’d better think of something else.” He took a swipe at the Noid with his saw blade hand, but the Noid back-flipped out of the way and ran over to Chad.

“This is a harder fight than I thought,” the Noid said. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay,” Chad replied. “How are we going to stop him?”

“I have an idea, but I’ll need a distraction. Can you do that for me?”

“No problem!” Chad ran over to Mr. Wormley. “Hey, jerk! Why are you such a jerk?”

“Silence, you fool!” Wormley fired more pizza stars at Chad, who barely dodged them in time. Chad ran as fast as he could as pizza stars embedded themselves in the wall inches behind him. Suddenly, Chad tripped on a wrench, and fell to the ground. Mr. Wormley stood over him and lifted his saw blade arm.

“This is the end for you, child!” he exclaimed.

“Not so fast, Wormley!” The Noid was standing directly behind him. He had something in his hands: an unboxed Domino’s pizza!

“What do you intend to do with that?” Wormley asked.

“This!” The Noid hurled the pizza at Wormley. It landed right on his head, the cheese, sauce and topping dripping all over the suit, causing it to spark and malfunction. The pizza star launcher and the saw blade turned back into hands, and the suit began to fall off of Mr. Wormley. He crumpled to the floor.

“H-how?” he asked.

“I told you,” the Noid replied. “Domino’s pizza is vastly superior to anything Tomestone makes. That includes your abomination of a Noid suit. You’re going away for a long time, Wormley.”

“Just because you found all of the pizzas doesn’t mean you’ve won!” Mr. Wormley yelled. “You’ll never stop Dark Noid in time! You don’t even know where he is! You’ll spend all night searching for him while he laughs at you from the Pizza Tower...” he tried to stop himself, but it was too late. He had given Dark Noid’s location away.

The Noid called his men to come take Mr. Wormley and the pizzas away. “That’s all of the pizzas,” he said to Chad. “Now all we have to do is stop Dark Noid.”

“Did you find out where he is?” Chad asked.

“I did indeed. He’s in the one place I never would have expected him to be: Pizza Tower!”

Chapter 17

“Pizza Tower?” Chad asked. “What is that? Some kind of tower?”

“Have you learned nothing since you moved to Bend?” the Noid asked. “Pizza Tower is Bend’s tallest building, constructed by eccentric billionaire Antonio Pizza back in the 70s.”

“Antonio Pizza? Who’s that?”

The Noid had a look of frustration. “He was the richest man on the west coast. He pretty much built this town. He funded the Pizza Library, the Pizza Medical Center. The school you go to, Pizza Elementary, is named after him.”

“Oh,” Chad replied. “I thought it was just named after pizza. What happened to him?”

“Antonio Pizza was the most well-known man in town. He was beloved by everyone, and was constantly making appearances on local television. One day he was on the local news giving another interview, when he suddenly mentioned that despite his last name being Pizza, he really didn’t like pizza very much! Can you imagine a man named Pizza not liking pizza? Naturally, the media had a field day with the interview, and everyone began to question his motives. The harassment became so great that one day he packed up and moved far away, never to return. He left his legacy, and his Pizza Tower, here in Bend.”

“Who the heck doesn’t like pizza?” Chad asked. “So where is this freak’s tower anyway?”

“It’s on the other side of town. You can’t miss it since it’s the tallest building. Come now, let’s be on our way.” Chad and the Noid both activated their helicopter ears and were soon in the air, traveling towards Pizza Tower. Chad could see it from a mile away; it was huge! He couldn’t believe that he had never noticed such a large building until this very moment.

Chad and the Noid landed in front of the tower and walked towards the large revolving door. Something was wrong, however. The revolving door was surrounded by a blue glow. Chad walked towards it.

“Chad, stand back!” the Noid warned. He moved in front of Chad and took a closer look at the glow. It looked to be electrical in origin. He grabbed a nearby stick and threw it at the revolving door. The stick touched the glow, and with a loud crackle, disappeared into a cloud of dust. Chad screamed.

“It appears that we’re not getting into the tower until we can find a way to deactivate this force field,” the Noid said. “If we don’t come up with a solution soon, this mission is as good as over.”

“Maybe we should follow that,” Chad said, pointing to a large electrical conduit that ran from the revolving door and away from the building.

“Of course! Well done, Chad!” The two followed the conduit down the street and arrived at a power plant. The conduit went inside the plant, and connected to a huge transformer. A group of thugs guarded the transformer, as if they had known that the Noid and Chad would find their way there.

“The boss said you two would find your way here,” the head goon said. “It’s lights out for you guys. Get them!” The rest of the thugs advanced, ready for a fight. The Noid quickly took most of them out with his martial arts, but one thug was still coming for Chad. Chad reached for his yo-yo, but it wasn’t there. He had completely forgotten: it was destroyed during the fight with the T.O.I.D.! Chad frantically pressed buttons on his suit, hoping that something would help him out. His binoculars popped out onto his face and his phone turned on, but still nothing helpful. The thug grabbed Chad’s shoulder just as he tried one last button. A pair of roller skates popped out of Chad’s feet and he and the thug were propelled forward at an amazing speed. They crashed into a wall, the impact knocking the thug unconscious.

“Well, that was surprisingly easy,” Chad said, looking at the pile of unconscious thugs.

“Indeed,” the Noid replied. “Let’s see if we can cut the power to the force field.” They walked over to the transformer. The control panel was an odd device attached to a screen. Chad immediately recognized the device as a Nintendo Entertaining Service, just like the one he had at home! He ran over and tried to turn it on, but the only thing to come up on the screen was the message “Access Denied.” Chad blew into the game port and tried again, but received the same message.

“Hmm, there must be something I’m missing,” Chad said. He took another look at the game box and realized that there was not a game in the port. Surely putting the right thing into the port would grant access to the transformer controls. He looked around and was shocked at what he saw: a Domino’s pizza box, with one slice of hot, delicious Domino’s pizza inside! Chad knew what he had to do. He grabbed the pizza, shoved it into the game port on the side of the Nintendo, and flipped the power lever. A familiar chime played as the Nintendo booted up with its normal prompt: “Welcome to Nintendo! Command?”

Chad typed “Turn off force field,” and hit Start.

“Force field is now off. Goodbye!” The Nintendo turned itself off.

“Excellent job, Chad!” the Noid exclaimed. “You really got us out of a bind!”

“There are two things I’m an expert on,” Chad said. “Hot, fresh Domino’s pizza and working a Nintendo. Now let’s go teach Dark Noid a lesson!”

“Indeed,” the Noid replied as they left the power plan and headed back towards Pizza Tower.

Chapter 18

Chad and the Noid arrived back at the entrance to Pizza Tower. Just as they expected, the force field was no longer keeping them from entering the building. They passed through the revolving door and arrived in the lobby. An abandoned security desk sat in front of them, and several elevators were on the wall behind the desk.

“Well, this is it,” that Noid said. “This is what we’ve been fighting for all day. I’m sure that Dark Noid is waiting for us on the top floor. Be prepared once we get off of the elevator. There’s no telling what tricks Dark Noid will have up his sleeve.”

“Let’s teach that punk a lesson,” Chad said, walking towards the elevator. He hit the button, but nothing seemed to happen. He hit it a few more times, just in case it didn’t register, but still no response.

“It looks like Dark Noid deactivated the elevators, just in case we made it this far,” the Noid said. “We’re just going to have to reach him the old-fashioned way: by taking the stairs.”

Chad felt like he was going to be sick. “The stairs? But this is the tallest building in Bend. That’s going to take forever!” Chad was never much for physical fitness. His idea of a good workout was lifting 50 slices of delicious Domino’s pizza from his plate to his mouth. His mom, who was concerned that her son was not getting enough exercise, had even bought him Track Games for the Nintendo, which came with the official Nintendo Floor Mat, but he would usually just get down on his knees and hit the yellow and green lettered buttons of the Floor Mat with his fists. Chad felt like a little too much of an intellectual for all of this jock stuff, but it looked like it was about to come back and haunt him at last.

“There’s no other way, Chad, so I’m afraid you’ll just have to fight through it as best you can,” the Noid said, as they walked to the stairwell. Chad opened the door and looked up. He couldn’t even see the top!

“Why can’t we just use our ears to fly up the stairs?” Chad asked.

“Chad, using helicopter ears in stairwells and other tight spaces is extremely dangerous,” the Noid replied. “I can’t believe you would even think such a thing. If I had a nickel for every partner I’ve had who was taken off duty after a helicopter accident in a stairwell, I would be a very rich man indeed. Now let’s stop chatting and get to it.”

They began their climb.

* * *

Chad had been climbing for what seemed like hours. He looked down between the stairs, and could no longer see the first floor. He looked up again and could not see the top either. He had no idea how long this nightmare would continue. “How long will this nightmare continue?” he asked.

“We haven’t been climbing for too long. Have patience. We’ll be there soon enough,” was the Noid’s reply.

* * *

Chad couldn’t tell what time it was anymore. He assumed that it had to be the next morning, or even night, based on how long they had been climbing. He limped his way past yet another floor. Even if they made it to the top, he wasn’t sure how he would have the energy to fight Dark Noid.

“Maybe we should set up camp,” Chad said.

“It won’t be much longer,” the Noid said. “Please stop being so dramatic.”

* * *

Chad woke up from a long nap. The Noid was carrying him over his shoulder as he continued to climb the staircase. Chad had collapsed a while ago after expending every last ounce of his energy trying to make it to the top. Unfortunately, his best efforts were not enough, and he could go no further. The Noid arrived at the top of the stairwell and opened a door to the top floor. He placed Chad on the ground.

“We’re here, Chad,” the Noid said. “The sixteenth floor. We’ve finally made it.”

Chad yawned and stretched. “I think I’ve got most of my energy back, but I’m going to be sore for days. I’ll never climb a staircase ever again. Not even a single step!”

The two heroes took a look at their surroundings. To the right were the elevators that should have taken them here in the first place. To

the left was a wooden double door that let to Antonio Pizza's former private residence. Dark Noid was no doubt behind that door.

"Alright, be prepared," the Noid said. "He could be hiding anywhere in there, ready to strike. Once the door is open, be on your guard at all times." Chad held his breath as the Noid kicked the door open. They walked through the door into the living room.

"Welcome," Dark Noid said. He was sitting right there in the living room on a throne made of pizza boxes. "Please, have a seat."

"I'll not sit down until you're brought to justice!" the Noid replied.

"Relax, Noid, I don't intend to fight you. In fact, I've got other plans." Dark Noid said.

"Other plans? Explain yourself!"

"Oh, don't worry," Dark Noid sneered. "I'll explain myself. In just a minute."

GAME HINT

A man found a razor blade in his Pizza Hut pizza last month. I just thought it was important that you know.

Chapter 19

“Now where was I?” Dark Noid asked. “Ah, yes, I was about to explain what I have planned for you.” He stood up from his pizza box throne and began to pace. “You’ve always thought you were better than me. The day you saved the pizza sauce recipe and left me to die in that vat of sauce, you were declared a hero. Your face was on televisions and magazines for months. But what about me? I was shamed. A failure as an agent, they said. Thrown out of the program and disgraced. All because you didn’t have my back that day. You let me go out after the thief by myself and let me fail, just to elevate yourself. I was always better than you and it drove you crazy!”

“You were always reckless,” the Noid said. “It was only a matter of time until something like that happened, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it.”

“Liar! If you’d have helped me, this never would have happened. But you chose to humiliate me instead. So I’m going to humiliate you now. Per Section 702 of the Domino’s Pizza Employee Manual, I challenge your position via a pizza eating contest!”

The Noid gasped. Section 702 stated that anyone who felt that you were not living up to Domino’s Pizza’s high standards could challenge you to a pizza eating contest. If that person won, he or she could choose to take your position with the company, and you were exiled. If the challenger lost, however, he or she was banished from Domino’s forever. The rule was rarely used and was a memory of the chain’s more aggressive and feudal past, but Dark Noid was prepared to challenge the Noid for his job.

“That’s right,” Dark Noid said. “You embarrassed me and made me look like a bad Domino’s employee, but when I defeat you in this pizza eating contest and take your job, you’ll be the one who looks like a failure. Once I have your job, I will usher in a new wave of darkness, the likes of which Domino’s has never seen! They’ll rue the day they fired

me!” Dark Noid let out a sinister laugh that sent a shiver down Chad’s spine.

“Don’t do it,” Chad said to the Noid. “Handcuff him and we can end this right now. He’s just messing with you.”

“I wish I could, Chad,” the Noid replied. “But a rule is a rule. If I don’t accept his challenge then I automatically forfeit, and he gets my job. The only way to end this now is by beating him.”

“Can you do it?”

“Pizza eating contests are covered in our training just in case something like this were to happen. I’m confident that I can beat him.” The Noid turned to Dark Noid. “Very well, Dark Noid. I accept your challenge. Let’s get this over with.”

“Excellent,” Dark Noid sneered. He started to disassemble his pizza throne and place the boxes on a nearby table. All of the boxes actually contained hot, delicious Domino’s pizza of all different varieties. It took every ounce of Chad’s concentration not to run over and start eating all of them. Once each of the pizzas had been placed on the table, Dark Noid faced the Noid. “You know the rules. Go ahead and choose the first pizza.”

The rules of the pizza eating contest were simple. Each participant chose a pizza for the other person to eat, and then they would both eat their pizzas at the same time. The first person to surrender, throw up or become incapacitated lost the contest. The Noid looked over his options and chose a Meatlovers pizza for Dark Noid to eat. It was common practice to get as many heavy pizzas into your opponent as early as possible in order to slow him down.

“A predictable choice, but that’s not surprising, coming from you,” Dark Noid said. “Here is my choice.” He handed the Noid a Veggie pizza. An odd choice for the first pizza, the Noid thought. Perhaps Dark Noid thought that he didn’t like vegetables, but his training had prepared him for worse things.

“Alright, eat up,” the Noid said. Dark Noid wasted no time shoving the Meatlovers pizza into his mouth. The Noid grabbed a slice of the Veggie pizza.

Chad couldn’t believe that he just had to stand there and watch this. It almost seemed like this should be illegal. What about him and his pizza needs? Whoever won, they had better leave some for him. He watched Dark Noid eat his pizza almost as quickly as Chad usually did. What a pro! The Noid wasn’t nearly as fast as he was. Chad took a look at the Veggie pizza that the Noid was working on. It looked like your

average vegetarian pizza, with onions, green pepper, mushrooms, and so on. Something seemed a little off, though. Was that?...*it was!*

“Noid! Don’t eat it!” Chad screamed. But it was too late. The Noid shoved almost the entire slice in his mouth and began to chew. He stopped suddenly, realizing what was on the pizza. *Jalapeños!* The Noid’s face turned bright red and he fell over, sweating. Dark Noid almost choked on his pizza as he began to laugh.

“Yo! Noid! What’s the matter? Too hot for you?”

“I-I can’t go on...” Chad could almost see steam coming out of the Noid’s ears.

“Looks like I win! That was easier than I thought!”

“You cheated!” Chad screamed.

“Nowhere in the rules does it state that jalapeños are forbidden. Learn to lose with grace. I had better get the news stations on the line and let them know about Domino’s Pizza’s latest blunder.”

“N-not so fast, Dark Noid,” the Noid said. “This isn’t over.”

“Of course it is! You’ve collapsed and given up. Your job is mine!”

“I knew you were too reckless to read all of the rules. According to Section 702.13, if a participant in the pizza eating contest can’t continue during his or her first pizza, a substitute eater is allowed.”

Dark Noid flipped through his Employee Manual. Sure enough, there it was! He threw it to the ground in anger.

“I’ll choose my replacement now,” the Noid said, still on the floor in the fetal position from the pain of the jalapeño.

Chad felt his heart skip a beat.

“I choose Chad Jenkins!”

Chapter 20

Chad Jenkins felt like he had been born for this very moment: a pizza eating contest against the Noid's archenemy and former partner, with the fate of Domino's Pizza in his hands. Dark Noid was still furious from the rule that he had somehow missed.

"Let's get on with this," Dark Noid said. "The Noid was trained to handle a pizza eating contest, and look at how I handled him. I may have used my entire supply of jalapeños on him, but you're no match for me."

"Stop talking and give me some pizza, you jerk," Chad replied. He wasn't about to let Dark Noid get to him.

"Very well. The Noid will be picking you up off the floor in no time."

The first pizza Chad received was Domino's Chicken & Bacon Carbonara, an inspired blend of robust marinara and Alfredo sauce, grilled chicken breast, smoked bacon, cheese, diced tomatoes, and a dash of oregano on an artisan-style crust. It looked and smelled delicious. Chad ate the entire pizza in two minutes. The Noid and Dark Noid could hardly believe it.

Dark Noid laughed. "You amateur! Keep eating like that and this contest will be over in no time!"

Chad's next pizza was Domino's Italian Sausage & Pepper Trio, made with Parmesan Asiago cheese and sliced Italian sausage, a trio of fresh green peppers, banana peppers, and roasted red peppers, on an artisan-style crust, topped with a dash of oregano. Chad dug in. He somehow managed to finish it slightly faster than the other pizza!

A few minutes later, Dark Noid finished his pizza, Domino's Cali Chicken Bacon Ranch Pizza, and threw the box in anger. "Impossible! Surely you'll slow down soon!"

"Fat chance, loser! Where's my next pizza?"

The pizza eating contest went on for an hour. Chad ate delicious pizza after delicious pizza, like Domino's Honolulu Hawaiian Pizza, consisting of sliced ham, smoked bacon, pineapple and roasted red peppers, cheeses made with 100% real mozzarella and provolone on a cheesy Parmesan Asiago crust. He ate Domino's Wisconsin 6 Cheese Pizza, a delicious pizza made with 100% real mozzarella, feta, provolone, cheddar, Parmesan and Asiago cheeses, sprinkled with oregano on a cheesy Parmesan Asiago crust. Chad even ate the legendary Bacon Cheeseburger Feast: smoked bacon, beef, cheeses made with 100% real mozzarella and topped with cheddar cheese. Every pizza Chad received was a new adventure in taste. He had never thought about just how many varieties of pizza you could get at Domino's. It really was an amazing restaurant!

Finally, after a long, grueling competition, Chad and Dark Noid looked up at each other, only to notice that there were no more pizzas!

"I...I can't believe you matched my skills!" Dark Noid said. "I must give you credit where it is due. Unfortunately for you, it wasn't enough to beat me. Still, a draw is nothing to be too ashamed about."

"A draw?" Chad asked. "Does that mean you're leaving?"

"For now," Dark Noid replied. "According to the rules, a draw means that I can re-challenge the Noid whenever I want until a definitive winner is decided. You may have stopped me today, but I'll be back. Maybe next week, maybe next year, but this is far from over."

Chad looked at the Noid, who was still lying on the ground next to the jalapeño-laced Veggie pizza. "No," Chad said. "This ends now." He walked over to the Veggie pizza and picked it up.

"No, Chad," the Noid pleaded. "It's not worth it! I'll challenge him again later. You don't have to do this!" But his words fell on deaf ears.

Chad took a huge bite of the Veggie pizza and began to chew. His face turned bright red and he began to sweat profusely. The Noid watched Chad as he brought himself to eat the entire thing. Until then he didn't know that it was possible to chew and scream at the same time, but this was exactly what Chad did for ten excruciating minutes. Finally Chad swallowed the last bit of the Veggie pizza and looked up at Dark Noid, tears streaming down his face.

"N-nooooo!" Dark Noid yelled! "Impossible! It can't be done!" The Noid came up behind him and put him in handcuffs.

"It's over Dark Noid," he said. "By the powers given to me by Domino's Pizza, I place you under arrest. I hope you enjoyed all of the

pizza you've eaten today, because you won't be having any for a long, long time."

"You'll pay for this, Noid!" Dark Noid screamed. "You too, Chad Jenkins! You haven't heard the last of me!"

"Don't be so a-Noid about your situation," Chad said. Nobody else seemed to get it.

Members of the Domino's Task Force came into the room and grabbed Dark Noid, leading him to their helicopter. The Noid walked over to Chad.

"Well done, Chad," the Noid said. "Your resourcefulness allowed us to finally defeat Dark Noid and deliver the missing pizzas to all of the customers in town. You'd do well in the Domino's Academy for Young Agents."

"Really? Me?" Chad asked. He had never thought about being a Domino's agent.

"Of course. After seeing you in action today, I'm confident that you could handle any situation. I know it's not an easy decision to make, but if you decide that it's for you, I would most certainly give you a recommendation."

"Wow! Thanks!"

"Now, let's get out of here. There will be many press conferences to hold tonight, and the town will soon know all about your deeds. You'll be a hero in this town, Chad Jenkins!"

Chapter 21

The rest of the evening was a whirlwind. The Noid and Chad exited Pizza Tower only to be bombarded by reporters and news cameras demanding to know all of the details of their heroic mission. The Noid was used to these kinds of situations; his training and experience made talking to the public easy. Chad, however was having a hard time taking it all in. This was the most attention he had ever had in his entire life. It was amazing, but overwhelming. Chad and the Noid gave interviews with countless stations, retelling their adventure for hours. The news outlets branded Chad as the Pizza Hero; as far as he was concerned, he was only doing what any pizza lover would have done, but the name had a ring to it.

After they gave their interviews, the next stop was City Hall. The mayor himself wanted to thank them personally! They stood at the steps of City Hall with the mayor in front of even more reporters. A microphone was set up at the steps, and the mayor began to speak.

“On behalf of the City of Bend, I would like to personally thank Chad Jenkins, who, with the help of the Noid, has brought peace to our city during a time of pizza-related chaos. As thanks for Chad’s unprecedented impact on Bend, I hereby present him with the key to the city!” Chad received a giant key that had the town’s insignia carved into it: a dove and an eagle, flying freely and majestically over Bend Lake. There was even a Domino’s Pizza logo on it too! The crowd cheered as Chad took the key and shook the mayor’s hand.

The Noid then took Chad to Domino’s main Bend office, so he could be thanked by his team. The Pizza Task Force clapped as Chad came in and they all shook his hand. There was a special guest waiting for him as well: Tom Monaghan, C.E.O. of Domino’s Pizza and Chad’s hero! Chad had once written a book report about Mr. Monaghan, and while he failed because it was not actually based on a book, Chad learned everything he could about him in the hopes of one day attaining the same level of pizza-related success and wealth.

“Chad, I wanted to thank you myself for getting my company through this crisis. You prevented a publicity nightmare by stopping Dark Noid before he could destroy our delicious pizzas and cause our stocks to drop. I’m sure that the Noid has told you about this already, but as thanks we would like to reward you with free pizza for life.” he handed Chad a gold-plated gift card. “This gold Domino’s Gift card entitles you to one small, one-topping pizza every day for the rest of your life, excluding holidays.”

Chad’s eyes welled up with tears. This was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

Mr. Monaghan continued. “The Noid tells me that you might make a good agent one day. If you like, we can give you information about the summer camps that we hold for kids like you, to help prepare you for one day becoming a Domino’s agent.”

“Like I said, it’s a hard choice to make, Chad,” the Noid said. “It won’t be easy, or cheap, but I believe in you.” Chad couldn’t wait to go to Domino’s training camp. He knew that as soon as he explained the offer to his mom, she would certainly have no problem with paying the tuition.

“Well, I need to be going,” Mr. Monaghan said. “I’ve got press releases to write and investors to reassure. Thank you again for your help, son.”

“No. Thank *you!*” Chad replied.

Finally the Noid took Chad home. Chad’s mom greeted them at the door, deciding not to mention the Noid suit that Chad was wearing. “Did you have a fun time with your friend?” she asked. Chad thought about all of the times that he was attacked or fell. He simply nodded his head. “Well, good. It’s getting late. Are you hungry? Our pizza finally arrived a little while ago.”

“Actually, no,” Chad replied. This was the first time that he had ever turned down delicious Domino’s pizza. He couldn’t wait until he woke up and had it for breakfast though.

“Well, I believe my job here is done,” the Noid said. He held Chad’s mom’s hand and kissed it. “Ms. Jenkins, it has been a pleasure.” She blushed at the display of chivalry.

“Don’t leave!” Chad said, running towards him. “You’re my best friend! What am I going to do when you’re gone?”

The Noid put his hand on Chad’s shoulder. “You’ll be just fine, Chad. You’ve grown into quite the capable young man this evening. There are no challenges that you can’t overcome. All of our problems are like

Dark Noids that simply need to be defeated. If you continue to devour the pizzas of Positive Thinking and Kindness, your Dark Noids don't stand a chance."

Chad and the Noid hugged, then the Noid turned on his ear helicopter. Chad waved as the Noid slowly lifted into the air, and then disappeared into the night sky.

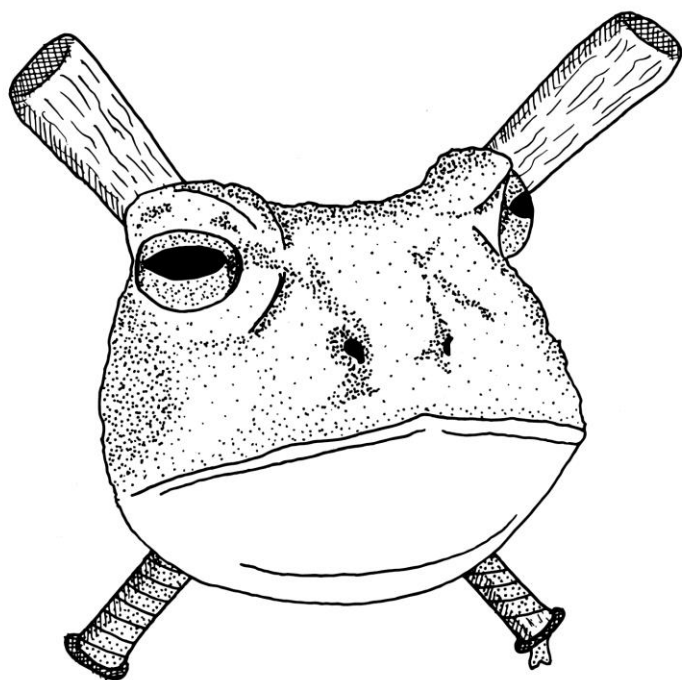
Chad's mom stood behind him and put her arms around him. "Are you okay?"

Chad wiped a single tear from his cheek. "Yeah, mom. Everything's going to be alright." Chad truly believed it.

Thanks to Domino's Pizza and his best friend the Noid, everything was going to be just fine.

GAME HINT

Congratulations on finishing the book. Why not reward yourself with a hot, delicious Domino's pizza?



BATTLETOADS

by Philip J Reed

DAY ONE

Chapter 1

Little Tommy Bonner was so excited! He could hardly sleep the night before, and now here he was! His grandfather pulled into a parking space and stopped the car, and Tommy remembered back to what had happened:

“It’s up there,” Tommy had said to his grandfather. “On the right!”

At that point Grandpa Albert activated his right-hand turn signal, pulled into the parking lot, and found an empty space. And now, here he was!

“I am so excited!”

Together they climbed out of the car separately.

“I know you are, little Tommy,” said Grandpa Albert oldly. “But don’t run in a parking lot. It’s very dangerous!”

“Oh, grandpa,” said Tommy. “You’re such a cranberry tart!”

Grandpa Albert grabbed Tommy by the head and lifted him into the air. “You watch your language, young man.”

“I’m sorry.”

With his apology, Tommy was returned to the pavement. “It’s okay,” said Grandpa Albert. “I know you’re excited. But I was your age once, too, you know. And I hope that some day very soon you go on a special adventure that teaches you the importance of respecting your elders.”

“Oh yeah,” Tommy said foreshadowingly, “like that will ever happen!”

He then ran inside the convention center, holding his ticket high and ululating with delight.

It was Battletoad Con '91!

* * *

Battletoad Con '91 was the highlight of Little Tommy's life! It was the first Battletoad Con that he was old enough to attend, and he was allowed to go because he spent the previous weekend shoveling snow, raking leaves, watering the lawn and trimming the hedges. He was a good boy who did all of his chores, and always said thank you, even when his father was beating him. He certainly knew his place!

"Grampy!" said Tommy, wanting his Grampy to look. "Look!"

He pointed toward the stage, where the lights were just beginning to dim. A man standing in front of a poster-sized poster of the five Battletoads—toads that were capable of performing human-like tasks, such as walking forward and wearing sunglasses—told everybody politely that they had to shut up.

Grandpa Albert found some seats and waved Tommy over. The boy was carrying all of his favorite Battletoad merchandise for the Battletoads to sign! He had a Battletoad lunchbox, a Battletoad Thermos (inside of the Battletoad lunchbox), a Battletoad decoder ring (which didn't come with the Battletoad lunchbox, but was also inside of the Battletoad lunchbox), a Battletoad key fob (which also did not come with the Battletoad lunchbox, but since the Battletoad lunchbox was so large and roomy this, too, was inside of the Battletoad lunchbox), a Battletoad coloring book (which was small and also fit into the Battletoad lunchbox), a deck of Battletoad playing cards (inside of the Battletoad Thermos which was in the Battletoad lunchbox; the Battletoad Thermos did originally come with the Battletoad lunchbox but the Battletoad playing cards did not, even though they were in there now), and a complete set of Battletoad Battle-Action Karate Figures (see coupon at the end of this book; these were also inside of the Battletoad lunch box).

With so much high quality, totally awesome Battletoad merchandise, Tommy could hardly carry it all! But he enjoyed having it, and was glad he begged his parents to buy it for him, because it really was fantastic stuff that made so him much happier to own.

"Ladies and gentlemen!!!!" said the man on stage softly. "This is the moment you have been waiting for!!!! Who wants to see the Battletoads?!!!"

Everyone in the audience stood up, kicked their chairs over, did cartwheels, spun around, and said, respectfully, "I would."

“Then here come the Battletoads!!!!!!” intoned the man gently.

With that the curtain raised, the man ascended into the rafters, and the lights started flashing in time to “The Battletoad Battlerap,” which everybody started to sing along with. They also brought their palms together in pairs to create a fleshy, slapping sound that was sort of like “clap,” “clap.”

Eventually they got to Tommy’s favorite verse (the twenty-fifth) and he lifted himself off the ground so that his voice would be heard above everybody else’s as he sang:

It’s the B-B-Battletoads, takin’ out da trash

B-B-Battletoads. It’s Zitz, Pimple, Rash.

And the rest.

B-B-Battletoads, boiiii

They’re coming to your town!

They’ll help you party down!

They’re masculine and green,

Pimple does machines.

Tommy couldn’t believe his eyes! It was Rash! In the flesh! He stepped onto the stage and pumped his arms and legs for the crowd, who literally lost their minds! Even Grandpa Albert was screaming and wiggling his ears with joy. Rash was just so contagious!

“Hello to all of you Battletoads fans in the audience!” said Rash, frogly. “Do you like the Battletoads? My name is Rash, and I am one of them!”

At this the crowd spontaneously performed three revolutions of a dance known as The Battletoad Shimmy, which was their way of saying, “Yes, Rash, we do like The Battletoads, and we recognize you.”

He then introduced the two other Battletoads who were best known to audiences. “Pimple and Zitz, why don’t you come out and say hello to the people?”

Little Tommy Bonner was so excited! Of course, it was only three Battletoads and he had hoped for all of them to autograph his chest, but it was understandable. One had passed away, and the other preferred—as

far as Tommy could tell from the issues of *Battletoad Quarterly Magazine* that he kept under his mattress—to stay out of the public eye.

But Tommy didn't even get three! Two obvious humans, one of which Grandpa Albert boo'd because he was a negroid, walked onto the stage in cheap Battletoad costumes.

"What the dumpy bull spit?" asked Tommy sagely. "Those aren't the real Battletoads!"

Rash quieted down the consternation, however, by performing feats of strength for six hours. Everyone sat patiently as he tore up telephone books, bent horseshoes, and inflated hot water bottles with his legendary breathing ability.

Tommy thought, "I forgive you, Rash, for bringing two imposters to the convention instead of the celebrities my parents paid for me to see, because watching you smash ice with your head and say your catch-phrase over and over again was actually a lot of fun." Then he said it out loud.

"Well, kids," said Rash, "it's eleven o'clock at night, which means it's well past your bed times! That's why I'd like to remind you that Battletoad Coffee is available from each of our vendors, to help you stay awake and alert while you fill your shopping bags with official Battletoads giftware and collectibles. Now get shopping!"

Everybody did, and they were glad! Battletoad merchandise is great!

Chapter 2

Unfortunately, Little Tommy had eaten Flounder Jubilee for breakfast and had to drop the mother of all bowel movements. Grandpa Albert went out the parking lot to make sure the negroid wasn't anywhere near his car, and Tommy Bonner walked toward the bathroom, already feeling the creep of solid waste through clenched rectum.

The men's restroom wasn't very busy, which was good, because Tommy was not a woman and therefore couldn't use the other one. An unplanned fecal squirt was escaped into the boy's underpants through his anus, but before things got any worse he successfully excreted the bulk of his spoor into the toilet water.

"I feel better now!" Tommy emphatically announced. "Wee wool!"

His hand, as his brain silently instructed it to, reached out for some toilet paper. In doing this, he noticed a circular hole that was around two inches wide cut into the divider between the stalls. He looked through it but couldn't tell what was on the other side. He inserted his index finger into the hole, as he had been taught to do.

A moist, warm sensation settled snugly around Tommy's finger, and a fleshy tongue licked at it. "Mmm," said a voice on the other side. "Do you like that?"

Tommy did, and so he decided to visit the other stall and thank whoever it was in person. Much to his surprise, it was Rash!

"Rash!" shouted Tommy to the Battletoad who was kneeling beside the hole. "Was that *your* mouth?"

Rash got to his toad feet, dusted off his toad knees, and quickly ran to lock the restroom door. "Yes, yes," he said. "Not so loud. Listen, I was expecting somebody but...how old are you?"

"I'm nine years cute!" said Little Tommy Bonner.

"Shh. Okay. Listen, I..."

“I’m not mad that you sucked on my finger,” Tommy promised. “Where are the rest of the Battletoads? I came here to meet all of you. You’re my heroes, and your adventures would make for a fantastic video game!”

“I know they would,” Rash agreed. “But they couldn’t be here right now. I shouldn’t even be here. Legally...”

Tommy struck an intimidating pose, and punched a hole in the nearest mirror.

“They’re on an adventure?!” he shrieked charmingly. “Then let’s go! I’m your biggest fan! I bet it’s a mission to rescue Princess Angelica!”

Rash sat down on the bathroom floor and looked the boy square in the paunch. “Actually,” he nearly whispered, “yes.”

“And you’re one toad down...”

“That is also true...”

“Then how about it?” asked Tommy. “Can’t I help in any way?”

Shooting a quick glance at the door to make sure it was locked, Rash stood up again. “Yes,” he said. “I think you can.”

He led the boy into a stall, and sat on a toilet, legs splayed. “Come, Tommy Bonner. Rub this wart on my inner thigh, and I will take you to Battletoadia.”

“This right here?”

“A little higher,” Rash said, moving the boy’s hand. “And a little...rougher.”

Tommy was so happy to make his hero smile!

Chapter 3

Zip! Za-Zow! Mnffmn! Rash's spacebike zoomed through the sky and docked in the Battletoad Toadship Battlecruiser, a gigantic hovering vessel that physically resembled the group's distinguished mentor, Professor Theodore Bird. All of the machines around Tommy blinked and bleeped and blipped at him. He couldn't wait to tell the kids at school about this!

"I can't wait to tell the kids at school about this!" Tommy burped, pitching his can of Battletoad Cola underneath a throw rug.

Hearing this, Professor T. Bird turned around. He was standing with Zitz and Boyle around an impressive, latest-model Super VGA computer screen.

Tommy posed for them to demonstrate how strong he was. And then they looked at Rash.

"Another one," said Professor Bird, his beak opening and closing while the sounds of the words were created by vibrations in his throat. "After what we went through..."

"Professor," said Boyle, his mouth moving in a similar way to that in which Professor Bird's beak had just moved, allowing Tommy to conclude that they were used for similar purposes. "We have bigger matters to attend to. We can't fall to in-fighting. Pimple needs our help."

"The Pimple?!?!?!!!!!!" murmured Tommy. "He's kidnapped too????!!!!!!!"

"Yes," Rash said quickly, straightening his toadbones.

"Then you need to go rescue him and Princess Angelica! And I've got to help you!"

Professor Bird swept some old newspapers and bird seed off of a table with his bird wing (because he was a bird) and stomped out of the room on bird-like feet and birdlegs. He was also wearing a lab coat that

had been designed to be worn by a bird person, and it fit him well for the reason that that's what he was.

Tommy said to the others, "Looks like somebody's got a *feather* in his cap! I wonder why he's so *soar*?" He then did a really funny dance and made fart noises with his armpit.

"He," said Boyle, putting his big green toad paw on the boy's shoulder, "has some other things on his mind. Please try to understand."

"I know you!" said Tommy. "You're Boyle! You're the noble courage behind the whole operation!"

Tommy then spun around several times and pointed at Zitz.

"And you're Zitz! You're the heart!"

Tommy spun around several more times and wobbled while he pointed at Rash.

"And you're Rash!" he said happily while vomiting. "You're the practical joker!"

"You're correct about all of this," said Boyle. "And Professor Bird is the brains."

"The *bird*-brains!" Tommy laughed through his emesis.

"Come on," said Zitz, changing the subject. "Take a look at this message we received from the Dark Queen."

From behind his leg Boyle produced a VHS cassette that had arrived via Mailtoad. It was recorded on SP for the highest picture quality imaginable, and Tommy's eyes became engorged with blood when he saw the Dark Queen appear on screen. She was wearing a skimpy leather corset that was even darker than her hair...and nothing else!

"Good morning, you toad-al losers!" she laughed tittily. "If you want to see Pimple again, you'll come to Planet Ragnarok and get him! But don't think it will be too easy," she said, dabbing at her nipples with a cold dishtowel. "My minions will be there to welcome you! And they don't play nice!" She then laughed: "*Nngyaba nmbaah pnoah!*"

The Dark Queen stepped aside to reveal that it wasn't just Pimple she had in her clutches; on the floor, chained to a radiator, her blonde hair a mess, Tommy recognized the captive.

"Princess Angelica!" he said, because he recognized the captive as Princess Angelica. "We have to rescue her! Her father is the king!"

Boyle turned the video tape projector off with a single touch of his long green finger upon the button that turned it off. He, Zitz and Rash exchanged glances.

“We?” Boyle asked.

“Yeah!” said Little Tommy Bonner. “I’m your biggest fan! I have all of your toys and kitchenware. I’m also very strong, and I’m really funny! I can make the enemies laugh themselves to death, while you beat them to death!”

“What do you think?” Rash asked Zitz.

“I don’t think we can return him without it looking even worse than it does right now,” Zitz shrugged.

“In that case,” ribbited Boyle humanly, “toad for one...”

“And battle for all!”

They then hugged their naked bodies together, groaning supportively.

Chapter 4

Professor Bird hovered the Toadship over the surface of Ragnarok. It wasn't a steady hover, and it felt as though somebody were tugging roughly back and forth on the steering wheel. Tommy started to laugh as he said, "What kind of bird can't *fly*?" Then he continued laughing while he said it.

The three Battletoads said nothing. They shepherded Tommy over to the escape hatch, from which they would drop down onto the red and brown planet with the holes and ice caves and turbo tunnels. They only had three sleeping bags, but Rash assured him that his was big enough for the two of them.

"I hope you brought lots of candy bars and pop!" Tommy adorably chastised. "I love to eat junk food and play video games!"

"Listen, Tommy," said Boyle, bending down and resting the part of his body that was his hand on the part of the boy's body that was his shoulder. "This is going to be a dangerous mission. The stakes are high, and the Dark Queen didn't get to become an evil ruler by taking it easy on others. She will send wave after wave of pigs with axes at us, and make us ride vehicles that move very fast and are extremely difficult to steer. And though she will sometimes send little flies our way that we can eat to heal a little bit, it doesn't happen very often and for the most part we will be in constant danger."

"Gotcha!" said Tommy, correctly. "I will be as helpful as possible, at all times, and will make sure I'm never far away from you and always involved in whatever it is that you're doing!"

The bay doors of the Toadship opened, and two ropes descended. To one clung Boyle and Zitz, to the other clung Rash and Little Tommy Bonner.

They touched down and waited for Professor Bird to call them on their futuristic video pagers. While paused the toads beatboxed

hypnotically. Finally, the pager jibbered, and the Battletoads snapped to attention.

“I’m sorry,” said Professor Bird, looking sallow through the feathers that were on his face and body because he was a bird. “I forgot for a moment what I was doing...”

“It’s okay Professor,” said Boyle. “We’re here now. On Ragnarok. Will you be okay back on Battletoadia?”

“I’ll be okay,” said the Professor. “If you don’t need me...I’ll be okay. Alone. But okay...”

Zitz and Rash caressed each other’s legs, knowingly.

“Professor,” said Boyle. “I spoke too soon. We do need you. Please, stay in the ship and keep tabs on our progress. Page us with advice. I don’t know what I was thinking. We’d be lost without you.”

“In that case,” said Professor Bird, through the mouth that was his beak, “go give that Dark Queen a taste of the dark green! Toad for one...”

“...and battle for all!”

With that they disconnected the video page, and shuffled onward.

* * *

For what felt like a mile and a half—but was actually a mile and two thirds—the Battletoads walked silently onward, across some ground that was kind of a greenish brown with black lines running across it. There were reddish brown rock formations in the distance, and a blue sky up above, but there were no enemies.

“Gee,” said Tommy, stretching. “It sure is boring around here!”

“My boy,” replied Boyle, nobly, “this peace is uncommon for Ragnarok. This is a world of danger, and you must be careful at every turn!”

“Okay,” said Tommy, picking up a bee hive and throwing it into a dark cave, alerting the tribe of pig monsters within to their presence.

“*Ayyyaii oonwaaaii py-ooooo!*” burbled everyone as they were swarmed by pig monsters and space bees.

Very quickly the Battletoads split up. Boyle used his long, hard tongue to grab bees out of the air and spit them harmlessly into the bushes. Zitz beat up a robot that teleported in, and snapped off the robot’s leg to use as a sort of “blunt instrument” with which to attack the

pig men. Rash, of course, ran back and forth headbutting things. It was poetry in motion.

“Hey pig men!” said Tommy, stepping into the fray. “I’ve got a joke that will make you sick with laughter!”

None of the pig men responded. They were busy beating up the Battletoads and getting beaten up by the Battletoads.

“I said I have a joke!” said Tommy, usefully. “Listen to my joke!”

Boyle said, “Tommy, this really isn’t the time.”

Tommy knew better, and, stepping in front of Zitz, who masterfully interrupted his impressive robot-leg swinging so that he wouldn’t hit the boy, he told his hilarious joke.

“This planet is called Ragnarok? Then where’s Ragnaroll?!?!?!?!?” he said, making sure to use the proper amount of question marks and exclamation points.

Zitz, who had stopped fighting so that he wouldn’t hit the boy, was beaten unconscious by pig monsters.

“Tommy,” said Boyle, “please, you need to be careful!”

Hearing this Tommy consumed all of their food, dumped out the clean water they had brought, and opened a cage beneath a sign that read DANGER: ANGRY GARGOYLES.

As the Battletoads were overcome by gargoyles and bees and pigs and teleporting robots, Tommy made sure to help his new friends along by telling tell the best jokes that he could.

Chapter 5

Night fell on Ragnarok, and by the time Zitz finished raising the Toadflag at toadcamp, Boyle was already standing behind him, arms crossed.

“I know what you’re going to say,” said Zitz.

“Of course you do,” said Boyle. “The question is, does he?”

He gestured subtly at the silhouetted figure of Rash, crouching in the grey bushes, and grunting.

“How could he not?” Zitz replied. “He was there. He took just as much damage as we did.”

“Physically, perhaps,” said Boyle. “When he’s finished wiping, tell him I need to speak with him.”

Boyle then padded off toward the dying fire. Their dinner of seared pork leg was long consumed. Most of the pig men had gotten away. The Battletoads had been victorious, but as their bandages, bruises and lesions attested, they had not been victorious enough. After all, this was only the first stage of their mission.

“Zitz said you wanted to see me?”

“Sit down, Rash.”

Rash did as he was instructed, and Zitz followed suit. The three Battletoads sat Indian-style around the gentle flame, leaving, as per tradition, empty spaces for the toads who were no longer present. There were now two of the original five that could not join them at toadcamp. When the next one left them—as he inevitably must, whomever it would be, and when—the balance would finally shift. There would be more Battletoads dead than alive.

The spacecrickets and spacebats sang. They sounded so far away.

Boyle closed his eyes.

“I need not remind you of what happened today,” he began.

Rash said nothing.

“And I need not remind you of how much it cost us in terms of time, money and energy to cover up the last one.”

“I’m sorry,” Rash said. Zitz knew that he meant it. Boyle knew, too. But Boyle obviously also knew that it didn’t matter.

“You made it very clear that this was not going to happen again. That boy sleeping in the tent...what if it’s even half as bad as last time? What if it’s twice as bad? You were fortunate for a long time that nobody said anything. But then one *did* say something. And what happened? You were lucky they were willing to settle. Do you think you’ll be so lucky again?”

Rash stared down at his feet.

Boyle closed his eyes and continued. “I know you can’t help it. I know your...predilections are not your fault. We are here to help you.”

“Absolutely,” said Zitz, reaching over Pimple’s empty spot to pat his friend on the shoulder.

“However, we are not willing to be sunk because of them. Your private peccadilloes are one thing, but the serious and mortal danger we were placed in today, as a direct result of your bringing that boy along...that is not acceptable.”

Zitz rubbed his palms together for warmth. The night, he felt, had grown so much colder.

“We can take him home,” Rash offered.

“We can’t take him home,” said Boyle. “We’ve discussed that already. And we’re in the middle of a lightning strike rescue op.”

Rash wasn’t looking at either of them. He didn’t seem to be looking at anything. Zitz tried not to either, but kept finding his eyes drifting toward his suffering friend.

“I wish...” Rash began, but trailed off. His whisper seemed to linger on the cold night breeze. It kept re-entering Zitz’s ears. It kept coming back.

When it was clear that he would not finish speaking, Boyle continued. “I know what has to be done. Zitz knows what has to be done. I know that you know it, too. The only question that remains is to whom the obligation must fall.”

The chilly wind whispered through the grey leaves.

“I can’t do it,” Rash said, raising his head. Zitz saw that he was crying.

“You don’t have to do it,” Boyle said finally. “But it has to be done.”

He stood up, and Zitz, after a moment, did as well. Boyle punched a passing spaceraven with his giant fist, and grabbed the blade that was once his beak. He ran a fingertip along the edge. It was sharp.

Rash stood up. “Wait,” he said. “Can I..”

He searched in obvious panic for words he could not find. Zitz turned away, but no matter where he looked, he felt he couldn’t turn away far enough.

Boyle nodded to Rash. He said, “Take your time.”

Rash disappeared into the tent, moving quietly, and Zitz looked at Boyle, who was examining the blade distantly.

The sounds of the insect and avian life seemed to well up again from nothing. The sounds of these smaller, simpler creatures, sharing a night free of worry. Free of obligation. Free of..well, thought Zitz, just free.

He wondered what they looked like. Whether they could feel the cold. He wondered what they ate. Who they considered to be family. He wondered if they knew how fortunate they were to be able to fly. He wondered how high they could get. How far away, from everything, they could get...if they wanted to...

The sound of the toadtent flapping open again caused Zitz and Boyle to look, and they saw a pale, shivering Rash walking toward the fire.

“Are you ready?” Boyle asked.

“Do I have to watch?”

“No,” said Boyle. “You don’t have to watch.”

Rash slid back down onto the ground. He warmed his hands against the fading flame. “Then just do it already,” he said. “He’s asleep. Get it over with, if you have to.”

“It’s for the best,” Boyle promised.

“I know it is,” said Rash. “I just wish it wasn’t.”

Boyle extended his hand. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s have some toadsmanship.”

Rash and Zitz extended their hands as well, touching Boyle's, once again leaving room for the two who could not join them.

“Toad for one,” prompted Boyle.

“And battle for all.”

Boyle then entered the tent with the blade in his hand.

Zitz wished he wouldn't hear the slice, the gurgling, the spill of the blood and the boy's vain struggle to stay alive.

But the insects were too quiet.

And the birds were too far away.

DAY TWO

Chapter 6

At the bottom of a deep hole, Zitz, Rash and Boyle found a long cavern stretching out before them. The light down here was dim and red, and while Boyle and Rash did their best to keep smiles on their faces while they beat off rat monsters in muscle shirts, Zitz knew—or hoped he knew—that they felt no better than he did.

The hollowness was large. Palpable. And it seemed to stretch out far ahead.

The further they progressed, the darker it got. Boyle pounded a rat monster into the ground, and Rash kicked its teeth out. To a hypothetical third-party onlooker, it was just like the glory days. Yet, somehow, the joy was gone.

They cheered each other on. They exchanged high-fives. But everything echoed back at them, like sounds in a prison. Zitz couldn't have been the only one who noticed.

"Little help?" called Boyle, who was being knocked back and forth between two rat monsters. He had to repeat it before Zitz registered the request, at which point he ran over and kicked them into the abyss with a gigantic boot. He then slapped away some small green enemies that were attempting to sap Rash of his energy.

"Wow," said Rash, dusting himself off. "I think things are going to get a lot harder here."

"They are," Boyle said. "And we're going to need to keep our wits about us." Was that a deliberate glance Zitz's way? "At all times."

"I'm sorry," Zitz said. "I...I'm still waking up."

Boyle said nothing, but he placed one hand on each of his comrades' shoulders. "Let's just focus on what's ahead. It doesn't do us any good to linger."

Zitz nodded, and the three of them ventured deeper into the tunnel. He was trying his best to keep his mind clear, and for the most part he succeeded.

As they walked, Rash made a joke. Zitz didn't hear it, but he laughed anyway. Boyle, it seemed to him, was making extra effort to walk as tall as he always had.

Stop, Zitz. Stop overthinking things.

They found five jetbikes lined up side by side.

Five. Once again, there were two that couldn't be here.

Stop, Zitz. Stop overthinking things.

"There's a note," said Boyle, pulling it from one of the jetbikes. He read from the page, his big eyes rolling side to side. "Dear Pesky Battletoads. My minions and I have kidnapped Pimple. The Princess is now a permanent guest at Dark Tower. I dare you to find her, if you can!"

He pitched the note into the abyss. Zitz watched it fall. Watched it never stop falling...

"We've got to save Pimple!" Rash proclaimed, flush, for the time being at least, with a sense of excitement Zitz was seeing for the first time all day. Boyle, noticing this as well, failed to suppress a smile.

"Well," said Boyle, "it's a long way to the end. And it *would* be a shame to let these jetbikes go to waste."

"Are you toadin' what I'm toadin'?"

Zitz smiled as well. Jetbikes. How could it *not* be fun?

With that, they sped away from wherever they had been, toward whatever it was that lay ahead.

Chapter 7

At Greenwood Cemetery, the rain was cold. The grey sky hung like a damp cloth over the already sodden ground. Shoes were muddy. Pant cuffs were muddy. In a few cases, shirts were muddy. The faces of those who bent to tie their muddy shoelaces and then used their hands to wipe away tears were muddy.

A great toad had left them. The world was one hero lighter.

Zitz stood with his hands clasped behind them. He was trying not to shiver, which only made him shiver more. He hadn't brought an umbrella, but even if he had he felt that opening it might be disrespectful. Somehow disrespectful.

In the casket before them, the casket that would soon be beneath them, the casket that none of them would ever see again, was his friend, the first of the Battletoads to cross the line between the living...and the dead.

Requiescat in pace, Taint.

To Zitz's left was Pimple. Still Pimple. The big toad with the big heart. He had wept openly in the cathedral, and the only reason he wasn't continuing to do so was that he was simply out of tears. He wasn't even particularly close to Taint. At least, no closer than anybody else had been. It was simply that he couldn't bear—could never bear—to say goodbye.

At one point Pimple reached out for Zitz's hand, just to reassure himself. When somebody was turning to Zitz for support, Zitz knew, things were bad.

The preacher spoke in tones so muted that he was drowned out by the gentle rain. Zitz heard the sounds rather than the words...intonations rather than invocations. From time to time he looked up just to make sure the man was still talking, and hadn't settled into a closed-mouthed hum.

Whenever he did look up, he saw the rest of the mourners. Owing to Taint's celebrity, it was a private funeral. It was the only way to

assure the solemnity of the occasion, and, yet, Zitz couldn't help but realize, the weather would have turned away any mischief makers anyway. It had been a needless precaution. Only Taint's closest friends would risk pneumonia to see him, here, now, the last time they ever would see him.

Zitz saw Professor T. Bird, staring down at his shoes. The old man wasn't drinking so much then. Or, at least, wasn't drinking so hard. Taint may have given him a hard time now and again, but the fondness between Professor Bird and Taint was—or, had been—clear. Their relationship was an antagonism of mutual respect. In the end, they both wanted the same things. If they wanted to achieve them in different ways, as they often did, there was friction. But it was friction with a purpose.

And now, Zitz reflected, there wouldn't be any more friction. And Professor Bird would miss that. Especially if this is what it took to bring peace.

Over Professor Bird's shoulder stood Boyle, stoic as ever. Zitz managed to both envy and despise him for a moment, but before long his feelings turned to appreciation. Taint's death hadn't hit Boyle any less than it had hit anybody else; he was simply better at holding himself together. That was beyond value to the team, and Zitz began to feel guilty for the ugly thoughts of a moment ago. He adjusted the black necktie that he wore over his naked chest, just to have something to do with his hands.

Standing apart from everybody else was Rash. Rash hadn't said a word all day. With all of the problems he had already, this was not going to make things easier. It was one thing after another for that guy. Granted, Rash was directly responsible for much of it himself, but, really, how much could he help? Who was fortunate enough to consciously select the things they'd most desire? To choose, Zitz wondered, the things they'd most require?

And, of course, there was one mourner he did not wish to see at all. He focused, instead, for a while at least, on the once dignified portrait of Taint that sat dripping on a metal stand, its colors too quickly slipping away. He focused, for a while at least, on the flowers, and the wreaths, and the suits that were being ruined by the rain. That were being overcome. That were saturated beyond their abilities to hold themselves together. That would never be the same again...

He knew he'd have to look at her, though. Of course he would. And, when he did, his heart broke.

Princess Angelica. As close to being Taint's widow as it was possible to be. The wedding had been set for that weekend.

That dark, black weekend.

Her blonde hair was matted wetly upon her head and shoulders and—Zitz felt sorry for noticing—her chest. She wore the dress she had purchased. Powder blue, with a tasteful flare around the waist. Taint never got to see her wear it.

Around her neck and wrists and ankles she wore the golden jewelry that he'd purchased for her, and on her head sat the crown that had been bestowed upon her at birth. The media and citizens of Battletoadia had spent what felt like a full year preparing for the royal celebration...but it had all been a waste. There would never be a Prince Taint.

"I'm going to take care of her for you," Zitz heard a voice say, and it took too long to realize that it was Pimple's. The big toad was speaking to his departed comrade. He was speaking, through the rain, to the toad that would soon be in the hole before them. "I promise you that. I am going to take care of her. I promise."

Zitz said nothing. He stared down at his feet, and toed the wet sprocket that wouldn't be needed to water the grass today. He didn't cry.

When the preacher finished reading from his soggy scriptures, Pimple, Zitz, Rash and Boyle hoisted the casket, and lowered it slowly into the ground.

They said nothing. Princess Angelica fell to the grass, mud staining the blue dress that she had intended to wear to a much more joyous occasion. Professor Bird attempted to help her up. She slapped his wing away. The color drained further from the portrait. The sky continued to fall.

As they lowered the casket, Zitz wondered what it must be like to be the toad in the pine box.

He wondered what it must be like.

To be surrounded by those closest to you.

To be surrounded by those who would miss you most.

To leave a world that would then be genuinely poorer for your absence.

To serve, on one fateful day, your spacecar losing its grip on a cold road in the dark, as the pivot point between one possible future and another.

Chapter 8

“Hoo heel!” said Boyle, climbing down from his jetbike. “That was exciting!”

“It sure was,” said Rash. “So much happening at once! And so much fun!”

“Yeah,” agreed Zitz. “It was.” Though, of course, he had been miles away. And years behind. It was a sad state of affairs when a funeral could be considered “happier times.”

He closed his eyes and forced it out of his mind.

There was work to be done.

* * *

The ice caverns weren’t far ahead. As they approached, Boyle’s video pager went off. It was Professor T. Bird, of course. Nobody else called them. Not anymore.

The professor had been drinking. He might not have even slept. His eyes were red and there were yellow stains down the front of his lab coat. He was hunched over the video monitor, using it to hold himself up, and not completely successfully.

“Toads,” he said. “Good morning. You have a hard day ahead of you, but I know you can push through. You’ve got to save Pimple!”

“Professor Bird,” said Boyle, with deliberate gentleness, after a few moments had passed. “It’s well past morning.”

“It’s six o’clock, Toads!” said the professor, struggling to stay upright.

“Six at night, professor.”

Professor Bird licked his beak. His eyes seemed to unfocus briefly.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Oh yes,” said Professor Bird. “Just...busy day. Time flies. Which...you know, saving Pimple...”

“I know, professor,” said Boyle. “Time is of the essence. Believe me, we understand. Thank you for your support.”

“I’m tired, Boyle,” the professor puffed.

Zitz and Rash exchanged glances. It was obvious that Professor Bird forgot that either of them were there. He may well have forgotten more than that.

Boyle squared his jaw. He nodded and said, “Professor, thank you for your encouragement. You know we couldn’t do this without you.”

“So tired.”

“We’ll be home soon. And we’ll have another toad with us. In the meantime, please eat something. Drink some water.”

The professor opened his mouth, as though to speak. Then he closed it again, and disconnected the transmission.

“It wasn’t always this way,” Boyle said, seemingly to himself.

Both Zitz and Rash stared down at the hard soil beneath them.

And then, after a deep breath, Boyle said, “The ice caverns are right up ahead. As you know, ice is slippery. As you may not know, the entire area is full of dangerous spikes and crawling with snowmen men.”

“There’s no other way through?” Rash asked.

“I’m afraid there’s not,” said Boyle. Zitz realized, then, what was happening: Boyle was taking on the role that Professor Bird had filled in the past.

When the professor had been more lucid, he’d provide as much helpful information as he could about the areas the Battletoads would be exploring. Lately, however, he was angrier. More terse. His advice was less helpful, less clear...it was peppered with nonsense and lame puns, making him sound like a pathetic old man trying desperately to entertain his disinterested grandchildren...which, the more he thought about it, was closer to the truth than Zitz at first realized.

“We have a challenge ahead of us, toads. My question to you...is can we do it?”

Rash nodded. Zitz said, “Yes.”

“That didn’t sound very convincing to me. But I’m feeling generous, so I’ll ask again. Can we do it?”

“Yes,” said Rash and Zitz, more or less together.

“For Pimple, that’s all you can muster?”

He paused.

“For Taint?”

“We can do it,” Rash said.

“Louder.”

“We can do it!” Rash said.

“Together! Toad for one...”

“...and battle for all!”

So loud was their battle cry that they could hear large icicles crashing to the ground from the caverns up ahead. Now there would be fewer obstacles to deal with.

Zitz took this as a good sign.

It was nice to have one of those for a change.

* * *

The ice caverns were dark, and every bit as treacherous as Boyle had suggested. Small platforms floated over pits as if by magic, gigantic porcupine shells rocketed across the floors, and tiny snowballs became massive white boulders as they tumbled down the icy slopes. The toads had to be careful with their jumping, with their dodging, and even with their punching and kicking. Zitz, in one moment of carelessness, accidentally threw a big fist into the back of Rash’s head. He apologized—and it was sincere—but Zitz could tell Rash was upset.

Maybe a bit too upset. Zitz was sure it had hurt, but when has a Battletoad ever *not* accidentally injured another in the heat of conflict? It was impossible not to.

“It was an accident,” Zitz said.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” And Rash stepped, or stomped, away. Zitz was left with his own reflection in the wall of the ice cave. He stood there. He watched himself blink. Somewhere behind him Boyle was beating a snowman man to death with his own carrot. Zitz watched it happen in the reflection, the image reversed. Backwards. If only everything could be reversed so easily. There might have been five toads on those jet bikes, and around that fire. Instead, there were three. And even though there were three, it increasingly felt like one, one, and one.

Boyle caught up and patted Zitz on the shoulder. “Forward, toadbrother,” he said. “We have a long way to go, but every step we take today is a step we don’t have to take tomorrow.”

Everything is time, Zitz thought. Everything is measured in time.

Rash was nowhere to be found. He’d wandered off somewhere up ahead. How long had Zitz been staring at his reflection? More time. Everything was time. Even the smallest things were time. Everything added up. Everything you barely noticed added up until you looked at the clock one day and realized how much of everything was *gone*.

Boyle and Zitz smacked and knuckled their way through the army of snowsnipers, weaving around deadly floating spikeballs, hopping carefully across platforms that crumbled beneath their feet. Zitz began to wonder if—or fear that—they were leaving Rash behind. There’s no way he could have made it through this. Not without leaving a trace. There weren’t any toadprints in the snow. This couldn’t be right.

“Rash,” Zitz surprised himself by muttering.

He was afraid. He couldn’t bear the thought of another Battletoad being lost. Not now. Not...no.

But Rash was there. Up ahead. So far up ahead that he looked tiny, and as Zitz approached his heart sunk again, because Rash wasn’t moving. He was facing the wall, and was standing stock still. Zitz feared that Rash had frozen to death.

His fears were not assuaged when he and Boyle sidled up beside their comrade. It was only when he eventually blinked that Zitz realized that Rash, too, was currently mesmerized by his reflection. Zitz reached out to touch his friend, and, when he did, he felt just how cold Rash was.

“Rash,” Zitz said. “You’re...your skin is like ice.”

Rash said nothing. Eventually he blinked again.

“Rash,” said Boyle. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you help me set up toadcamp while Zitz starts a fire. Moving around will be good for you.”

Rash shook his head once, slowly. He was still staring forward. At himself. Or whatever it was that was reflected back at him.

“I’m just glad,” Boyle said, attempting to spark conversation, “that we didn’t encounter any monsters in here. The snowmen men were bad enough, but compared to some of the beasts we’ve seen, they were nothing.”

“Maybe you didn’t see any monsters.” Rash licked his lips with his long tongue. It took him several minutes to do so. “But I’m looking at one right now.”

Zitz touched his friend again. “No. Rash...”

“What do you see when *you* stare into the ice? Is it the toad you thought you were? Boyle? Are you surprised by anything you see?”

“A fire will do you good, Rash.”

But Rash was beyond hearing. “All I know is that I see something reflected back that isn’t me. Or...isn’t what I want to be.”

“It’s been a long day,” Boyle said. “We’ve been without sunlight.”

Rash turned, at last, to face Zitz. Zitz wished he hadn’t. His friend looked broken. Defeated.

“I loved him, Zitz,” Rash said.

Zitz nodded slowly. “I know you did.”

“I know it had to end that way. But I really wish it didn’t.”

With that Rash walked away and began to silently set up toadcamp.

“You’re right,” he called back at last. “It’s getting late. I think we should all get some sleep.”

Zitz took a step to join him, but Boyle held him back with one calloused palm. He told Zitz it was best to give him some space.

“What if he needs us now?”

Boyle shrugged. “He doesn’t know what he needs. We can’t know either. But whatever it is he thinks he saw, it’s something that only he knows how to deal with.”

And so they watched him. Pitching tents. Arranging the firestones. Hoisting, alone, the toadflag. The last time it had flown, it looked down on Little Tommy Bonner.

But it couldn’t protect him.

Whom could it protect?

It was dark underground.

It was dark aboveground.

This was just the way things were now.

Chapter 9

As was ever the case, there was a lot more in the inbox than there was in the outbox. But that was okay, because it was, as he liked to joke, job security.

He told that joke again to Carl, who laughed and refilled his coffee. They were in the break room, killing time. There was work to be done, but you needed to take a little time for yourself, too. It improved focus. It heightened concentration. A little bit of social activity during the day actually made them more productive.

Carl slapped him once on the back and returned to work.

It was another normal day in the office. Another gloriously normal day.

The calendar on the break room wall was marked with the date of the company picnic. It was going to be great, just like it was every year. Mr. Henderson would make his famous chicken chili. Gretchen, the receptionist, would bring the fruit. There would be Frisbee, and Ladder Golf.

They would pitch horseshoes. Danny would bring his guitar, and sing silly songs that he made up about the managers. They would laugh, like they did every year.

The day would be warm, like it was every year.

The sky above would be clear. Blue. Every single year.

He smiled, checked his watch, and adjusted the collar of his dress shirt. It felt good to dress professionally. It felt good to feel clean.

He made his way back toward his office, high-fiving Robert, who had just gotten married. He exchanged pleasantries with Andrea, the elderly woman who only worked three days a week and made sure everybody's desk was stocked with supplies. And he winked at Lindsay, who winked back.

Lindsay always winked back.

He opened the door to his office. The plaque read BARRY ZITZ. He took his seat. In his chair.

In his own office chair.

And he unlocked his computer.

And he looked out the window.

They had to be a hundred stories up. All of the life in the city below looked so tiny, and peaceful.

Zitz knew it was noisy down at street level. Dump trucks and arguments and construction sounds. But from up here? Why, he could just stare down and see that, ultimately, with enough distance, it all resolved to a vision of quiet stability.

Zitz took a deep breath, and he smiled.

Mr. Henderson came in and asked him how the big report was coming.

Zitz told him it was coming along very well, and it would be done at least a week ahead of schedule.

“That’s why you’ll always have a job here, Barry,” Mr. Henderson said. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” said Zitz, and Mr. Henderson rapped his hand against the doorjamb once, and departed.

It was a beautiful day outside.

And it was a beautiful day inside.

The company picnic was coming.

And then, after it was over, another one would be coming.

A warm, pressed shirt. Regular hours. Health insurance.

A wink, a high-five, a handshake.

That’s just the way things were now.

DAY THREE

Chapter 10

The cold rushed into the tent like the breath of a dead man. Zitz opened his eyes, and felt the sharp blade of panic for a moment before he realized that the intruder was Boyle.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” the noble toad said.

Zitz held his head. His dream had escaped him.

“I think you might want to step outside.”

Groggily, Zitz did. Boyle stood beside the dying embers of last night’s flame. Zitz stretched, and Boyle said nothing. “Is everything okay?”

Boyle licked his lips, as though deciding whether to nod or shake his head. At last he said, “I suggest you follow the drops of my urine.”

Half-asleep and with aching joints and bones, Zitz padded along beside the dribbled trail of Boyle’s penile excreta. It led him eventually to a much larger, yellow-tinged disturbance in the white, frozen snow. Examining it with his fingers and nostrils he was unable to determine what it was that Boyle had wanted him to see. Standing up again, however, revealed it in the distance.

It was the figure of Rash, suspended by his neck from a rope around the branch of a dying tree.

Zitz ran toward him as quickly as he could, but he knew—already knew—that it was too late. The body was so pale it was almost blue.

What had Zitz intended to do, anyway? Cut him down? Carry him back to camp? Attempt to revive him?

Whatever it was that he had intended, it was forgotten by the time he reached his deceased friend. It was over. Zitz was too late to do anything that could have possibly mattered.

Boyle's footsteps crunched slowly in the snow, and eventually Zitz felt his presence by his side.

"I know how this looks," Boyle said. "But we can't lose heart."

Zitz glanced briefly at Boyle's face, but he couldn't see anything other than the vague, helpless confusion that Zitz himself felt. "When did this happen?" Zitz asked.

"Sometime last night," said Boyle. The two of them had shared a tent, and the cold wind woke Boyle just as it had later awoken Zitz. "I asked him where he was going."

Boyle paused. He took a deep breath.

"He said he was going out. And that he might be some time."

With that, as though the recollection had weakened him physically, Boyle sunk down into the snow. Zitz just stared at Rash's body. Staring, without seeing it. Without really seeing anything.

"He's been through a lot," Zitz said, emptily.

"And he's put us through a lot. But he was stronger than this. We are all stronger than this."

Zitz sat in the snow beside him. The rope from which Rash's body hung creaked gently in the subterranean breeze. He was now another limb on a slowly expiring tree, hanging imperceptibly lower with every passing moment.

"There was something," Zitz said, "that he couldn't handle. Something that we can't understand. He was strong. He was strong enough to make it this far. He just...couldn't make it any further."

Boyle shook his head. "We're jumping to conclusions," he said. "It's foolish to make assumptions."

Zitz was unsure of what Boyle meant.

"I mean that this..." he said, indicating Rash's current state with a flap of his big hand, "...whatever this is. With Rash's proclivities, this could have been accidental."

"Accidental?"

"Some...fetish gone wrong. We have no way of knowing. You and I both know stranger things have turned him on."

"Yes," Zitz said. "That's true. I'm sure he was only trying to masturbate."

“Right,” said Boyle. And then, a moment later, more quietly: “Right.”

Boyle produced the blade that had taken the life of Little Tommy Bonner, and the two remaining Battletoads went about the mournful business of cutting him down.

* * *

When the video pager rang, Boyle took a second or two longer than usual to answer it. He held his breath, as well. Zitz wished he hadn't noticed these things.

“Up and at 'em, toads!” said the professor.

“We lost Rash,” Boyle announced, as steadily as he could. “During the night.”

Professor T. Bird blinked a few times. Then he said, “Rash.”

“You remember Rash,” said Boyle, but, for a moment, it seemed that the professor might not have. He was getting to the point that old man knew the Battletoads more by sight than by name. The next stage, Zitz knew, would be forgetting the Battletoads entirely.

“He's the one with the...” began the professor.

“The boys,” said Boyle.

“Oh, yes. Yes, the little boys. Of course I remember Rush. How is he?”

Zitz bit his bottom lip. Boyle said, “He's dead, professor.”

“Oh, right,” replied Professor Bird, nodding just a tad too hastily. “I remember now. We were at his funeral. He was supposed to marry that...duchess?”

“It's okay, professor,” interjected Boyle. “We're proceeding with the mission as planned.”

“The mission,” said the professor.

“To rescue Pimple,” Boyle reminded him.

“Pimple...”

“We'll be back soon. I want you to do something very important for us, professor. Do you have a pen? This is the most important part of the entire operation.”

Professor T. Bird patted his thighs and realized something. “I forgot to put on pants.”

“It’s okay professor. What I want you to do is keep the Toadship in tip top shape. Because we’re coming back triumphant, and I want everything to be perfect.”

Professor T. Bird spent a full minute trying to clear his throat of sputum. He spat it into a paper cup full of molted feathers and cigarette ash. “Okay,” said the professor. “You want me to clean?”

“Whatever you think you need to do, professor. You’re the boss, remember. I’m sure that whatever you choose to do, it will be perfect. We couldn’t do this without you; please don’t forget that.”

“Okay,” said the professor. “I...I have no pants so I’ll try to remember it.”

“Thank you, professor.”

“Now go rescue Rush. Show...show everyone why they call you the Battling Toads.”

Boyle nodded, thanked the professor again, and disconnected the call. He reattached the pager to his belt.

“He’s slipping too,” Boyle said.

Of course, Zitz knew that the professor had slipped a long time ago. The only difference was that Boyle’s defenses had been worn down enough that he could admit it.

* * *

As they packed up toadcamp there was profoundly little to say. They worked in doleful silence to lower the toadflag, smother the live embers, and deconstruct the two tents.

Zitz discovered the note while folding and rolling his sleeping bag. It was from Rash.

Zitz had neither heard nor felt him leave it there, which meant that Rash’s final memory of Zitz would always be different from Zitz’s final memory of Rash.

“I saw it in those caverns,” the short letter began. “I saw it, and I must destroy it.

“We’ve spent our years fighting monsters. What I saw yesterday revealed to me that the greatest monster was right here, claiming to be on the side of justice.

“I did not choose to be the way I am. But this is me, and I must be strong enough, at last, to make amends for that. By the time you read this, the monster will have been slain.

“The coward’s way out would be to continue. To suppress. To hide.

“I’ve been a coward for too long, Zitz.

“For the first time in my life, I will be a Battletoad.

“Yours in Christ,

“Dermott C. Rash.”

There was a post-script, but it was only Rash’s catchphrase. Zitz had heard it a thousand times before. But, now, with that letter weighing so heavily in his hands, “Rash Smash!!!” seemed to pack an even larger emotional punch than it had before.

Chapter 11

When Zitz and Boyle found their next major series of obstacles—logs floating dangerously in a strong river—there were three vehicles that would go unused. Five surfboards were lined up side by side. One of them that would stay behind now belonged to Rash. Perhaps if he had known the surfing segment of the mission was just ahead, he...

...no. Zitz stopped himself. Yes, Rash loved to surf. But no, Rash's were not the wounds that could be healed by the promise of a thrill.

Only two of the boards would be occupied...and yet the balance hadn't quite tipped in favor of the dead. After all, there was still Pimple, who was a much more complicated case...

"Are you ready, friend?" Boyle seemed to be making an extra effort to be nice to Zitz. He was almost disarmingly chatty, and politely so.

Zitz tried to remember if there had been a similar uptick in Boyle's conversational effort after the death of Taint, but so many of those memories have been erased. Or, he supposed, more accurately, replaced.

The death of had then seemed like the largest of all possible tragedies. In retrospect, however, it felt so small. There were so many subsequent tragedies with which it now had to jostle for attention.

"I...think so," said Zitz.

As much as he didn't want to continue with the mission—as much as he wanted to return to the ship and sleep, perhaps for decades—there was no other option. From the deep pit that led straight down into the planet to the ramps in the Turbo Tunnel that only faced one way to the platforms that had been destroyed as they proceeded through the ice cave, one thing was clear: the only way back was forward.

Boyle handed him a surfboard. "Well, now is as good a time as any, I'm afraid."

Zitz said “I’m afraid, too.”

And with that, they surfed the rapids with as much detachment and melancholy as was possible.

* * *

With every log that they dodged, with every whirlpool that they narrowly avoided, with every rat on a missile that sailed by like a missile without a rat on it, Zitz had to fight harder to keep from drifting away. Drifting back to the past. The funeral so long ago. That feeling. That promise.

It was the first thing that had really shaken The Battletoads. It wasn’t the last.

“I am going to take care of her,” Pimple had promised. Zitz remembered those words. Above the roar of the current Zitz could still hear them. They were whispered on the breeze, just as they had been that day. There were droplets of water spraying all over Zitz...just as there had been that day.

After the funeral, Pimple stayed off by himself. He kept shooting glances at Princess Angelica, across the room, who was wrapped in her own more obvious sorrow. She cried into her hands. Her blue dress—nearly her wedding dress—was wet and caked with mud. Professor T. Bird, in a moment of understanding that seemed downright uncharacteristic now, draped some towels around her. She didn’t seem to notice.

Pimple waited for over an hour before he said anything to her. And, when he did, it was nearly the same thing he had said to Taint. “I’m going to protect you. Like I should have been protecting Taint. I swear to Godfrog above that this will never happen again.”

Angelica said nothing. There was so much to take in. But Pimple, for a long time anyway, did live up to his word.

Whenever they found themselves besieged by the dark forces of the Queen, it was Angelica to whom Pimple sprinted. At first Zitz had to wonder—and Rash openly questioned—if this was some latent infatuation that now had room to flower, but as far as anyone could tell, Pimple’s intentions were chaste.

He didn’t flirt with her, he didn’t desire any kind of restitution for his good deeds, and he didn’t even steal into her cabin on the Toadship and press the undergarments to his face. He was a perfect gentletoadman.

Unfortunately his protectiveness reached critical mass. Fighting off armies of killer robots and laserballs was one thing, as was punching

the Dark Queen in the throat when she implied that Angelica's golden bangles made her look like the key to the ship's molecular rehydration unit: everybody had a turn. But his concern for the princess didn't end there.

When Herpie, the ship's chef, forgot to take Angelica's lactose intolerance into account when preparing Wednesday evening's nacho mountain, Pimple injured him deliberately and severely with the ground beef ladle.

When a piece of space junkmail arrived addressed to Prince Angelica, Pimple traveled to the spacecar dealership that had sent it and smashed the windows out of every vehicle with a leg that he snapped off of the company's teleporting salesrobot.

And when Professor Bird himself implied that Pimple was becoming unhealthily protective of the girl, Pimple reminded him that the only eggs he had ever sired were so frail that none of them survived long enough to hatch. The old bird stripped out of his lab coat then, and walked slowly over to the ship's airlock. It was only the big, quick hands of Boyle that prevented him from stepping out into the eternal night.

Of course, it couldn't last forever. Something, as Spacedean Martin once sang, had to give.

What gave was the rotted wooden floor beneath Princess Angelica, as she, Pimple, Zitz, Rash and Boyle explored the haunted house in which they had to spend the night if they were to claim the inheritance of Boyle's grandfather. They'd decided already that they would stay together and sleep in shifts, and Pimple had spent days reading up on which kinds of kicks and punches were most effective against ghosts, but once they entered the house and the doors sealed behind them, they knew the entire thing was a ruse on behalf of the Dark Queen.

"*Nyah boyra pnumvo*," chuckled the Dark Queen, laughingly. "You Battletwerps stepped right into my trap!"

"Where are you?" asked Boyle, turning around.

"I'm safely aboard the Gargantua, Battlebarfs! You're the ones in danger. I'm just sitting on my dark throne, naked apart from my leather pasties, watching my new favorite show: *Everybody Kills The Battlebutts!*"

"The doors are thick," Rash announced to the rest of the group. "I kicked them multiple times. It's not going to budge."

"The door won't budge," cackled the Dark Queen. "But the floor just might!"

And, with that, it did. It fell right out from beneath Princess Angelica, she did not even have time to scream. Pimple, of course, was not far away, and he managed to grab her wrist as she fell. He tumbled to the floor, but he had her.

He still had her.

“Tonight my giant spaceworm dines on frog legs! *Ha hrve tnag bunbun!*”

“Don’t let go,” Pimple said. He could have been speaking to either himself, or the dangling princess.

From below the toads heard the roar of the spaceworm, and though they each moved toward their endangered colleagues, the room flooded with killdroids and murderbots and deathchines, forcing Zitz, Rash and Boyle to hold the foes at bay.

“Pimple,” said Angelica.

“I am going to take care of you,” Pimple said. “God damn it. I am going to take care of you.”

But his grip was loose. His palms were sweaty from driving the spacecar on the way to the haunted house without his driving gloves. He knew he should have turned around for them. He *knew* it...

She slipped. He caught her again, but only barely.

“Pimple,” she said again.

“I am going to take care of you!”

“I think I’m going to see Taint.”

“You’re not going anywhere!” Pimple shouted, putting all of his strength to use at once in pulling her up.

And he did pull her up.

Part of her.

The spaceworm consumed Angelica in one bite. All but her hand—which still wore Taint’s ring. Pimple pulled it up from the pit. He stared at it in disbelief. Zitz stared at it in disbelief as well, and took a killdroid’s fightbat to the back of the head for his distraction.

Pimple sat on the floor while the other three toads decommissioned the robots with their patented blend of stylized brutality, and when they were finished the doors automatically unlocked.

Zitz, Rash and Boyle didn’t move toward the exits, however. They instead gathered around Pimple.

Pimple, who sat on the ground, clutching and staring into the five fingers, palm and wrist that was all that remained of Princess Angelica.

He said nothing all the way back to the ship.

He entered his cabin, and he didn't come out for three days. Not even for meals, or to use the toadshitter.

When the door opened again, as they all knew it eventually must, Pimple was a different person entirely.

Chapter 12

“What a ride!” Boyle announced. “And I thought the Turbo Tunnel was exciting.”

But Rash wasn’t there. There was no momentum. Try as he might—though he didn’t try for long—Boyle wasn’t able to muster up the backslapping camaraderie of the glory days. Zitz quietly left his surfboard on the pier. He imagined it must have been pretty dinged up from the logs, but he didn’t care. He simply walked away.

“Hey,” said Boyle, trotting to catch up.

Zitz stopped and turned to face him. He opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. There weren’t any words.

“I know you’re hurt.”

Zitz shook his head.

“You don’t have to hide it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed,” Zitz said.

“Angry,” tried Boyle.

“Angry?” repeated Zitz. “Yes. Yes, I am angry. Is this what you imagined? Is this really where you thought you’d be?”

Boyle nodded. “I understand. But we’re not far now. The snake pit is just ahead. It won’t be long before we find Pimple.”

“And then what?” Zitz asked. “Can you answer that? I can.”

Zitz grabbed his head in what must have looked to Boyle like pain, because the elder toad reached out to him. Zitz slapped his big hands away.

“I’ll tell you exactly what happens,” said Zitz, stepping away from Boyle, his volume rising beyond conscious control. “We do it again. And again. And we do it again. And we lose another. And we lose another. And before long nobody’s left, Boyle.”

A gigantic ratboss approached, obviously looking for a scuffle, but seeing the state Zitz was in he lit a cigarette and hung back. By the time the conversation was over, he was gone. He must have given up and gone home.

“For crying out loud, nobody’s left.”

Boyle took a deep breath.

“There’s nothing to say to that. Is there?”

Boyle closed his eyes. “No.”

Zitz leaned over the weathered wooden railing. He stared empty at the underground sea around them. So open. So vast and wide. And yet completely enclosed.

The illusion of freedom.

“What happened to us, Boyle?”

Boyle didn’t say anything. He joined his companion—his only remaining companion—at the railing.

“How did we get here?”

“This isn’t over, Zitz,” Boyle promised.

“It’s over,” said Zitz. “It’s been over. I don’t know much more we need to go through before we realize how long it’s been over. People are dying. This isn’t fun anymore.”

Boyle said, “It was never supposed to be fun, Zitz. Fun isn’t what this was about.”

“I know,” Zitz replied. And he did know. It was about justice. It was about doing the right thing. It was about rescue, and safety, and adventure. It was about cosmic policework. It was about reducing the evil throughout the galaxy. It was about replacing it with heroism. “But it was fun for a while, wasn’t it?”

Boyle exhaled once, and then smiled. “It sure was, Zitz.”

“Do you remember Taint’s bachelor party?”

Boyle laughed a singular laugh. “How could I forget?”

“Those kids outside the liquor store? We walked them home. Taught them a lesson on the way about growing up too fast.”

Boyle looked at Zitz, but Zitz was still focused on the distant horizon. He continued talking.

“We walked them home and what did we find? Princess Angelica, being unloaded from a van a few houses down.”

The sound of an undergroundspacegull echoed off of the waves and the walls of the cave.

“We didn’t have to take those kids home. We chose to take those kids home. All we wanted to do was get back to the Toadship and celebrate with our friend.”

“We did the right thing,” Boyle said.

“Of course we did. And because we did, we were able to rescue Angelica.”

Boyle nodded. “We still do the right thing, you know.”

A moment passed. The gull soared further into the distance. But it couldn’t get away. Not completely. It was enclosed. This was a bird that would fly for his whole life, and never know the sky.

“I do know that, Boyle. I’m just confused as to how the right thing used to be walking kids home to keep them out of trouble, and now it’s cutting their throats while they sleep.”

Zitz pounded a loose fist once against the wooden railing, and then he stepped away.

“Zitz,” said Boyle, turning and grabbing his shoulder.

Zitz stared at him. He blinked once.

“Times change.”

“I know,” said Zitz. “I’m just really hoping that they change again.”

* * *

Above the caverns, above the surface, above the atmosphere, there hovered the Toadship. Professor Theodore Bird stood naked in the middle of the commissary, alone, the engines providing an endless, steady hum.

There was nobody else aboard; the staff had been dismissed long ago. This didn’t stop the professor from calling out to them, by name. The bottle of fermented whiskey dangled limply from the hand at the end of his wing. He lifted it to take a swig, but ended up smacking himself in the beak, which made him laugh as he staggered forward.

He didn’t know what time it was. He tried to steady himself on weak knees, but failed. He caught himself on a chair—barely—and took a

moment to clear his throat. He spat several times onto the ground, his chest feeling hollow and raw.

“Unngh,” he said, catching his breath. At last he did, and he straightened himself up again.

And that’s when he saw that he wasn’t alone after all.

The bottle slipped from his hand and shattered on the floor. The ring of breaking glass hung in the recycled air.

“Who’s there?” Professor Bird called out to the figure, though it came out as little more than a frightened rasp.

The figure didn’t answer. It stood there. In the shadows.

“Come out,” said the professor. “Come out here, you coward.”

“No,” the figure replied. “You come here.”

Its voice was gentle.

Its voice was...comforting.

“Who are you?” asked the professor, disarmed.

“Come closer.”

With difficulty, the professor did. And as he did, he saw that it was another bird. A tall bird, with good posture, and excellent teeth. The feathers on his head were stylishly slicked back, and he was wearing a very smart four-piece suit.

The professor felt the urge to reach out to him. To touch him.

To hug him.

“No,” said the younger bird. “Not yet.”

“Who...?”

“Don’t you recognize me?” the bird asked. “I’m your son.”

The professor silently began to cry. “You survived.”

“We all survived, dad,” said his son. “We’ve been waiting for you. We’ve been wondering where you were.”

The professor sunk nakedly to his knees. He said, “This isn’t possible. Those eggs...”

“We’ve missed you,” said the boy. “I’m an accountant now.”

“An accountant,” said the professor, bleary-eyed, as he wiped mucous from his face.

“In space,” said the boy with a nod. “I got your brains. And I got mother’s strength.”

Professor Bird’s heart skipped a beat. “Your mother?”

“She misses you, too, dad.”

“I’ve...I’ve missed her.”

The young bird nodded. He extended his hand. “Why don’t you come with me?”

The professor found a pair of underpants on the floor and dried his eyes with them. He then stood up to take his son’s hand, but could not reach it.

The boy stepped back. Professor Bird stepped forward. The boy stepped back again.

“Wait,” said the professor. “Wait for me...”

“Take my hand, dad.”

“I can’t! You keep moving!”

“Dad,” said the boy. “Take my hand...”

And the professor tried, again, and again, to take the boy’s hand, but he could never quite reach, until, in an instant, the boy disappeared, and Professor Theodore Bird found himself face to face with the airlock doors.

His son must have been just outside.

He’d find him there. He’d find all of them, out there.

He threw the switch to activate the mechanism, and opened the hatch.

DAY FOUR

Chapter 13

The snake pit had gone well enough. Or so Zitz thought. Toward the end Boyle took a bit of a spill when the snake they were riding jerked unexpectedly up instead of down, but fortunately they had been over solid ground. Zitz dropped down after him and tried to help him up, but Boyle waved him off. "I'm fine," he said.

They rode the series of thick snakes back up to the exit, and then set up toadcamp. Zitz couldn't help but notice Boyle limping, but, he figured, that could have been for any reason. Over the past three days they'd been battling and exploring non-stop. If a tumble to the floor gave you slight limp, it wasn't cause to worry; it was cause to be grateful that that was all you had to show for it.

The next morning, however, he awoke to find Boyle beside the dying fire, dressing what was now a swollen and distended calf.

"Boyle," Zitz said.

"I'm fine," said the big toad. "I slept on it wrong."

Zitz crouched down beside him. "We can rest today," said Zitz. "We can take it easy and continue on tomorrow."

"Out of the question."

"Boyle," said Zitz. "You can't walk on that."

"I will walk on it," Boyle promised. "There's no other way."

"We rest," said Zitz, rationally. "That's the other way."

"We need to get back to the ship. Professor Bird isn't answering my video pages. He's probably fallen down somewhere, and there's nobody aboard to help."

"It doesn't help anyone if you get hurt, too."

“I’m not hurt,” Boyle said, standing up. “But I may need to lean on you.”

“We’re leaving the supplies,” Zitz said. “If you absolutely insist on moving forward, these stay right where they are.”

“We need them.”

“Yes,” said Zitz. “But we can’t *carry* them. You can’t do it in your shape, and I can’t do it if I’m carrying you. We can buy other tents.”

Boyle did not protest further. He slowly surrendered more and more of his weight to Zitz, who was surprised at how much strength he himself still had. Perhaps it was because he felt, he hoped incorrectly, that though Boyle was in actual danger.

“How much further?” Zitz asked.

“I don’t know,” said Boyle, sounding far too exhausted for a toad who wasn’t doing his own walking. “It can’t be long now. The Gargantua should be somewhere up ahead.”

And it was. They soon began to encounter detritus from the crashed vessel. The Gargantua had been the Dark Queen’s home and primary mode of transportation until it was sideswiped by a meteor and collided gracelessly with Ragnarok.

For reasons Zitz couldn’t fully understand, he began to wonder what her face looked like, what expression she wore as her ship shuddered from the impact. Was there panic in her eyes? What did she reach for desperately? Did she sweat as she grappled frantically with the controls, her flying fortress spinning helplessly through the void?

What did she think? What did she regret? What memories and fears and unfulfilled goals flashed through her mind? Did the tiny stars become streaks of light through the windscreen? What did the song playing on ship’s radio have to say? Was it encouragement or a sarcastic farewell? What secret dreams and desires did she come so close to leaving behind? What face was it that she caught glimpse of in the mirror?

What face was it?

And why was Zitz seeing Taint in that driver’s seat instead? In his space car? It was a smaller vessel than the Gargantua. He hadn’t taken the toadship. He was just going to be a minute.

He was just going to be a minute.

And he never made it back.

How was it that Zitz and Pimple and Rash and Boyle and Taint had fought so naively for justice in a universe that clearly had none? Why was it that Taint's brush with a meteorite was so fatedly fatal, while the Dark Queen emerged unscathed?

How could a hero be left to fall? How could evil be let to rise?

Taint was sealed forever, deep in the cold, black soil. The Dark Queen was safe, high at the top of her tower.

And why.

Why.

There was no question mark because there could be no answer.

Zitz dragged a weak and broken Boyle further through the caverns. They were underground, too, but at least they were alive.

At least. Or, at most.

Before much longer, however, they made it to the outside of the crashed vessel. It was also, unfortunately, the end of the cavern; the Gargantua itself prevented further progress.

"God damn it," Zitz said. And he knew Boyle wasn't doing well, because he made no reply at all. "Just God frogging *damn* it."

Zitz left Boyle to fall to the cavern floor, and then he kicked the wrecked frigate with an angry boot.

The metal echo hung in the stagnant air, and then a square grate fell down from the ship a few feet up. Zitz climbed up, and stuck his head through the opening. What he saw filled him for the first time in what felt like years with a sense that things might actually turn out alright.

"Boyle," he said, running over to his weakened friend. "The ship's full of water."

Boyle blinked slowly, and then he said, weakly, "What's that?"

"A good sign," said Zitz.

He helped his friend to his feet. Zitz saw that Boyle's leg was in even worse shape than it had been this morning. It may have been broken. Or was it a snake bite? Whatever it was, it was not getting better.

"The water might help," Zitz said. "We can swim through the ducts. That should be a lot easier than walking."

He helped Boyle through the vent first, and heard him splash down. Zitz hurried through behind him, and then helped him float through the water. A little bit of color came back into Boyle when he was

in the water, and this was something Zitz was pleased to see. He didn't know how far they'd have to travel through the ducts, but there was room to breathe, and that had been his main concern.

From above more water trickled and splashed through vents and inactive electrical plates. "It must have crashed through an aquifer," Zitz said.

"Where are we?" asked Boyle, his question echoing dully off the walls and the water around them.

"We're in the Gargantua," said Zitz. "It's okay. We're going to make it through and then we're going to climb that tower and we're going to save Pimple."

"Tower," said Boyle, and Zitz felt him grow perceptibly heavier.

They reached the other end of the ship after some tight maneuvering through hazards and spikes. There were eels and tiny sharks swimming around their feet, specimens perhaps from the shipboard aquaria, but they weren't aggressive. They were just trapped. Away from their homes. Lost. Dislocated. And, ultimately, doomed.

Boyle seemed particularly interested in them. So much so that when Zitz tried to help him through the escape hatch at the other side of the ship, he continued to stare down through the clear water at them. Watching them swim.

"We're here, Boyle," Zitz said, pulling him toward the hatch. "We made it."

Boyle turned his head slowly to look at Zitz. He said, "Yeah. We did."

"Come on," said Zitz, climbing backward through the hatch. He was holding onto Boyle's shoulders. "We are going to do this. Lift yourself up a little."

Boyle made no effort to do so. He grew heavier.

"Boyle," said Zitz.

"I can't," said Boyle at last.

Zitz continued to pull. "I know you're hurt," he said.

Boyle said nothing.

"You don't have to worry about it. You don't have to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Boyle said. "I'm just slowing you down."

Zitz understood. He wished he didn't.

He said, "No."

"How did we get here?" Boyle said. "That's what you wanted to know yesterday. Remember?"

"I remember," Zitz said. "Come on. We can finish this outside."

"It doesn't matter how we got here, Zitz." Boyle's voice was soft. Weak. "It only matters that we're here."

"We can get better," promised Zitz. "We can be better again. We were there, and we'll get there again. Boyle."

Boyle shook his head. "Nobody's left."

"This isn't over, Boyle!"

"It's over, Zitz."

And, with that, Boyle used what remained of his strength to wriggle out of Zitz's grasp. He floated away, further from the hatch. Further into the dark ship. And he sunk. Slowly. Until he was completely submerged. At one with the fishes.

"Boyle!" Zitz screamed. "Boyle!"

But there was no sound beyond the dripping of the water. And there wasn't even a shadow where Boyle had been.

"Boyle!" he called again. "You're a toad!"

No sound beyond an unsteady dripping. Slow, unsteady dripping.

"You can swim," Zitz said, after he had yelled himself hoarse. "You're a toad."

But he wasn't.

Not anymore.

Chapter 14

Blap! Powe! Kazazz!

Zitz slapped and bonked his way through the Dark Queen's henchmen as he scaled the tower from the outside. He hung from flag poles and kicked things and it was really incredible.

Anyway, he made it to the Dark Queen and then he beat her, too.

"You stupid toad!" she said, as she sealed herself into the escape pod. "You think you've seen the last of me?"

Zitz sat down on her sofa and gripped his face with his hands. He took a deep breath.

"No," he said. "I've never thought that. I certainly don't think it now."

The Dark Queen, uncertain, powered down the escape pod. The room went silent. "What did you say?"

"I said no," said Zitz, looking at her. His knees were bloody. One of his eyes was blackened. And he had stepped in pigman shit. "Even if you were to disappear, for whatever reason, somebody would take your place."

He licked his lips.

"Do you have any water?"

The Dark Queen climbed out of her escape pod, adjusted her breasts, and stepped over to the sideboard. "Well, I could offer you something a little stiffer."

"That would be great," Zitz said. "Thank you."

The Dark Queen poured two tumblers of spacescotch. She then dropped two handfuls of small stones into them, and handed one of the drinks to Zitz. She leaned back against her desk, and used one gloved hand to relieve herself of a leather wedgie.

"It's good," said Zitz.

“Some of the best,” said the Dark Queen. “A gift from Emperor Zangeaux. I haven’t been saving it..I just haven’t gotten around to drinking it.”

Zitz nodded, sloshing the grey liquid around in his glass. “How is Emperor Zangeaux?”

The Dark Queen said, “Not well.” She shrugged. “Matter of days, at this point. Who knows? I’ve been away long enough that he could be dead already.”

“They wouldn’t tell you?” Zitz asked.

“Who talks to me?” replied the Dark Queen. “Unless I’m blowing up a planet or robbing a spacebank, nobody even knows I’m alive.”

Zitz reached his green fingers into the liquid, and pulled out one of the stones. It felt very cold. He squinted at it.

“It’s safe,” the Dark Queen assured him.

“I’m not worried,” said Zitz, wearily. “At this point, it would hardly matter if it wasn’t.”

The Dark Queen stepped over to the sofa in her high-heeled boots, and she sat down beside Zitz. Her cape brushed his arm as she sat down, and she turned to face him.

“They’re just regular stones,” she said. “I keep them in the refrigerator. But I have to use them up here, if I want my drinks cold.”

“Why’s that?” Zitz dropped it back into his glass.

“For the same reason everything I drink comes from a bottle. We’re too high up.” She tapped the glass empty against her thigh. “The plumbing doesn’t actually work at this altitude. Not in any way that would do me much good.”

“I’m sorry,” said Zitz, unsure of what else he could say. And then, “Can you...?”

She gestured vaguely with her thumb toward a bucket on a rope. “Sure I can. And I have to. Whether I like it or not.”

“It’s like you’re a prisoner,” Zitz said.

The Dark Queen bit her bottom lip. “Yeah,” she replied, after a moment. “It’s a lot like that.”

“But why?” asked Zitz. “If this...all of this...if it’s not what you want? If it’s not what makes you happy?”

The Dark Queen finished her drink. "Because it's what I am." And then she extended her hand. "Can I get you another?"

Zitz downed what was left of his spacescotch and handed his tumbler to her.

While she poured she said, "This is my role. Everything you see here. It doesn't matter if it's fun. It doesn't matter if it's what I want. And I guess it doesn't even matter if it's livable."

She handed Zitz his drink, and then leaned against her desk.

"It's who I am. And it's what I signed up for."

"Does that matter?" asked Zitz. "You made a decision a long time ago. If you're not happy with it...what's keeping you here?"

"The universe?" she guessed. "Point is, I'm here."

"You can walk away from it," Zitz told her.

"In these heels?" she asked, and then she laughed. Or, at least, that's what Zitz thought he heard. When he looked at her again, he saw she was crying.

"You can take them off. You can take all of this off. And you can start over."

She nodded subtly. "Is that...what happened to your friends?"

"No," said Zitz. "They died."

"We all have our roles," said The Dark Queen. "Was it my men who killed them?"

"No," said Zitz. "But they sure did try."

"Thank you," said The Dark Queen.

Zitz stood up. He finished his second drink and set the glass on the desk beside her.

"Listen," he said. "I can't speak for you, but I went through a whole hell of a lot to get here. I've seen good toads laid low, and I've seen a child killed in the name of justice. I've learned something from this. I've learned that every day gone is a day we aren't getting back. And just because yesterday was one way, that doesn't mean tomorrow can't be different."

He took her face in his hands and turned her head to face him.

"Do you hear me? I don't care what kind of decision you make. Because it's not going to affect me anymore. You got that?"

He pointed toward her door.

"I'm going to walk out of that door in a couple of minutes. And, when I do, you're going to have a choice to make. I can't make it for you. I wish I could, but that's not the way this works."

The Dark Queen mumbled something.

Zitz told her to repeat it.

"I said," she said, "that you don't know how this works."

Zitz took a step back. He glanced toward the exit. He drummed his fingers against his chest.

"That's probably true," he replied. "But it can't be my excuse anymore."

He asked her where Pimple was, and she nodded toward the next room.

"Is it locked?" he asked.

Without looking at his face, she handed him the key.

"Thank you," he said. And then, "You know, there's a lot of stuff we don't know. If we used that as an excuse, we'd never do anything. And that's not the kind of life I can let myself lead. Not anymore."

He opened the door, and as he did so, he heard her say, softly, "We all have our roles."

And then he heard her kick, lightly, the escape pod that lay dormant on the floor of her office.

* * *

Pimple was indeed in the next room. He was right there, on the floor, when Zitz turned on the lights.

"Oh!" said Pimple. "My heroes! The Battletoads!"

"Yes," said Zitz, kneeling beside him, feeling the ache of doing so. "It's the Battletoads."

Pimple was wearing Princess Angelica's blue dress. And her crown. And a blonde wig and as much of her jewelry as had been left in the ship. Because this was just the way things were now.

"I was so nervous!" said Pimple, as always, in his best approximation of the departed Angelica's voice. She'd been gone long enough now that Zitz couldn't say how accurate it was. So much memory was fading. So much of the past was slipping away. So much of the color was running out.

“I know you were, princess,” said Zitz. “It’s okay now.”

And Zitz reached over and took a pillow from the cot.

“Oh,” said Pimple. “Is it time to go to sleep?”

Zitz swallowed. He closed his eyes and felt around for the courage of the spacescotch. “Yes,” he said. “It’s time to go to sleep.”

Pimple smiled. His lipstick and mascara were both smeared. They hadn’t been reapplied in days. His wig was askew. His fake nails were falling off.

“Can you tell me a story?” Pimple asked. “When I was a little girl, my father would always tell me stories when it was time to go to sleep. He’s the king, you know.”

“I know, princess,” said Zitz. “I can tell you a story.”

“Oh good,” said Pimple. “Is it a story about a pony?”

“Sure. It can be a story about a pony.”

Pimple said, “Yay!”

And Zitz began.

“It’s a story about a pony.”

“What’s the pony’s name?”

“The pony’s name is Sapphire.”

“Wow!” said Pimple.

“Yes. And Sapphire was the prettiest pony in the entire world.” He took a deep breath, and held the pillow tightly in his hands. “Sapphire’s owners loved her. And they’d ride her everywhere. And no matter where they went, somebody would say, ‘Here comes Sapphire.’ Not because they’d seen her before, but because they all knew Sapphire was the most beautiful horse, and this had to be her.”

“Pony!” corrected Pimple. “You big silly.”

“Sorry,” said Zitz. “Yes, she was a pony.”

“Are you making this story up?” asked Pimple.

But Zitz continued without answering him. “Sapphire loved her owners very much. And she loved the attention she got from the people in town. She loved all the rides she gave and she loved all the oats she ate.”

Pimple closed his eyes. Zitz knew he wasn’t sleeping, but he certainly seemed peaceful.

“But then,” continued Zitz, “there was one night. It was just a normal night, but Sapphire couldn’t sleep. Her owners were all in bed, and all of the stable hands were home for the evening. But Sapphire couldn’t get to sleep, so she took a walk.”

He waited. Pimple said, in a little girl’s voice, “Continue.”

“Sapphire took a walk. And that’s when she noticed how small her pen was. She only took a few steps, and then, there was the fence. She’d never noticed it before. I guess she’d always just assumed it was larger than it really was. But now, when she needed the space, she realized she didn’t have it.”

“Oh no,” said Pimple.

Zitz nodded, to himself. “Yeah,” he said. “Oh no.”

Pimple closed his eyes again.

“So she tried to fall asleep again, but now it was even harder. Because she...because she knew. And now that she knew, she couldn’t put it out of her mind. And the problem wasn’t that she couldn’t sleep tonight. The problem was...the problem was, how could she ever sleep again? Knowing how big the world is, and how little of it belongs to her?”

Pimple’s eyes were still closed. Zitz continued, in a softer voice.

“So she had a choice to make. She could either live the life she’s always known. And maybe that would be okay. Because *it had* been okay for so long. How bad could it be, if she didn’t even realize anything was wrong until now?”

He shifted his position so that he was on both knees. He held the pillow in front of him.

“Or,” he said, “she could jump over that fence. It wouldn’t solve the problem of the pen being too small, but it wouldn’t matter how small the pen was, because she would leave the pen behind. Because there was a lot more of the world out there for her.”

And he pressed the pillow down over Pimple’s face, and he tried not to watch his friend’s legs kicking.

“Some of it might be scary,” Zitz said. “Some of it might be painful. And Sapphire would probably find out that an awful lot of the world was much worse than anything she had ever experienced in that pen, or in town or with her owners.”

He pressed down on the pillow. Pimple’s legs, eventually, stopped.

“But you know what?” he continued. “The point is...she’d finally know. Because life isn’t about safety. And life isn’t about the role that somebody else thinks you need to play.”

He let go of the pillow, and felt around for a pulse. There was none.

“Life is about moving on.”

Zitz kissed his friend on the lips, and padded slowly away.

DAY FIVE

Chapter 15

In his cuffs and tie, eating a Caesar salad out of a battered Tupperware container, sat Barry Zitz. He was alone at the break room table, and two of his colleagues—Lyle and Doug—were speaking in whispers, laughing to each other. Every so often one of them would glance over at Barry and laugh harder.

He waited for them to leave, which eventually they did, and Barry scraped his salad into the trash. He no longer had an appetite.

On the way back to his office, as always, he heard his coworkers making comments to each other. They laughed about “the toadman.” One of them commented loudly to the pretty receptionist that this was exactly the problem with Affirmative Action.

Barry Zitz just looked at his feet, as he was used to doing now. He could walk from any point in the office to any other without even glancing up. Glancing up was more painful than walking into something.

He made it to his office and shut the door, as he always did. It opened again immediately after he unlocked his computer.

“Zitz,” said Mr. Harrington.

“Yes sir?” asked Barry Zitz.

“Am I going to have that report today or not?”

“I just finished eating lunch,” Zitz said.

“I don’t care what you were doing. I told you I needed it done by three o’clock. It’s almost one and I need to know if I’m going to have what I asked for, or if I need to start looking for somebody who can do the job we hired you to do.”

Barry said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Harrington. I'm going to work on it right now. It's just, you didn't tell me about it until eleven, and this is easily several days' worth of work..."

"If you spent as much time on your work as you seem to be spending coming up with excuses, maybe it would go a lot faster."

Barry said, "Yes, Mr. Harrington."

"I didn't hire you to tell me stories about why the work isn't done. I hired you to do the work and hand me the work and then get your green ass back to your desk to do the rest of your work."

"Yes, Mr. Harrington."

"Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Harrington," said Barry. "It's understood."

Mr. Harrington disappeared, leaving the office door open. Barry Zitz located the spreadsheet that contained the data he needed, and his computer crashed.

While he waited for it to reboot, Barry closed the door, and stepped over to the window that looked down at the busy street below.

From up here, he couldn't hear any of the noise. Any of the traffic. Any of the arguments. Any of the anguish or the heartache or the pain.

He couldn't smell the garbage. He couldn't feel the crunch of broken glass underfoot.

He could take solace in that much.

And he did.

Nobody promised him that things would be easy. Nobody promised him that things would be pleasant.

But he had promised himself that things would be different.

And they were.

He slipped back into his chair and opened the spreadsheet again. This time it stayed open.

Barry Zitz took a swig of cold, black coffee from his mug, fixed his tie, and got to work.

Beside him, in a simple frame, was a photograph from the 1988 Battletoads Xmas Smash. Rash had Pimple in a comical headlock. Boyle wore a Santa cap three sizes too small. Taint had his arm around Princess Angelica, and Professor Bird raised a glass of eggnog.

Zitz wasn't in the picture.

After all, somebody had to hold the camera.



MONSTER PARTY

By Tomm Hulett

Dedicated to Chewie, Miş, and Ico – my favorite little monsters

Chapter 1

Thump.

Thump!

Thump.

The baseball bounced off the wall each time Mark threw it. He didn't know why it made him feel better, but it kind of did. He tossed the ball again.

Thump.

His glove made a squish sound each time it wrapped around the ball—still wet from the long walk home in the rain. Mark wondered what his parents were doing that was more important than remembering to pick him up from baseball practice. It had been Dad's turn, but normally when he forgot Mom was there to swoop Mark into the car. It made him worry something might be wrong.

Mark's parents had been fighting a lot more than usual lately. It gave the young boy a knot in his throat, like he'd swallowed the baseball but it refused to be digested.

Thump!

Raindrops gently pattered against the window as Mark looked into the driveway. One car was there, so wherever his parents were they'd gone together. He pondered going downstairs and making some mac and cheese (his favorite), since it was getting late. Just a few more throws.

SCRITCH!

Mark's eyes opened wider than headlights and he gripped the baseball tighter than he did while watching first base. What in the world was that sound? He turned his head, hoping the noise was just his imagination playing tricks. There didn't seem to be anyone—or anything—else in the room with him. Yes, Mark decided, it was just the wind or something.

Thump.

The worst part of walking home so often lately, though, was Todd Halspur. He and his junior high friends liked to hang out in front of the game store Mark had to pass by on his way home from school. They'd taken notice of Mark and really got a kick out of teasing him. Some days it was Mark's haircut, others the pink uniform the baseball team forced on the players. Anything they could think of, really.

With everything going on lately, bullying was the last thing Mark needed, which actually made him glad it had rained all day—even Todd wouldn't stand around getting wet just to pick on a fourth-grader. Mark sighed. Maybe the mac and cheese wasn't worth it after all.

Sbbbbbbb...

Yes, Mark realized there was most certainly something else in the room, and from the sound of it that something was dragging itself along the floor. Too afraid to say anything, he once again carefully scanned the room. This time, he remembered to look down. He saw it. There, past the rug and some old smelly socks, a large claw had dug long, sharp talons into the floor. Mark couldn't believe his eyes—the claw was attached to a strong purple arm, covered in thick scales. The arm was reaching out from underneath Mark's bed. "Wh-what do you want?" said the boy.

The owner of the arm didn't answer. Instead, it seemed to feel around clumsily. Whatever it was quickly found another good spot and attempted to drag itself from underneath the bed. "Ouch," said the thing. Shortly afterward, the thing's head peeked into the room. What Mark noticed most was its long, sharp beak.

Mark jumped down from his chair and dropped his ball and glove. He leapt to the baseball bat propped against his desk and waved it around. "Don't move, Monster!" he said. "Or else!"

The creature's eyes lit up and it almost seemed to grin. "Monster?" it said. "Then you know what I am! Good! That will save some time." He seemed to consider another dragging attempt but thought better of it. "Name's Bert. Uh...how about a little help?"

Chapter 2

Mark rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Before him, freshly pulled from under the bed, stood a 6-foot tall monster. A monster named Bert, apparently. But this wasn't a drooling melting monster like in the movies—Bert had wings, and armor, and bird feet. Like a flying knight. As Mark watched, the monster opened his wings gently, like a cat stretching its legs. The wings then folded politely behind Bert. "Mind if I sit?"

Mark nodded. Bert sat on the boy's bed, causing it to sag much lower than usual under his weight. At a loss for words, the manners taught by his mother kicked in. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine," Bert said, folding his sharp, clawed hands in his lap. "I came here searching for a hero."

"Like Babe Ruth?" Mark grinned. Maybe this monster knew about baseball.

Bert considered the idea for a moment. "No, a babe would be much too young. But someone your age will do nicely."

Mark knew kids his age couldn't be heroes. That was something you had to grow into, after years of discipline and training. Or at least years of public school, according to Mark's mother. Bert clearly wasn't from anywhere like Earth. But the boy worried that if he said anything Bert would leave, and that would be a waste.

Mark nervously asked, "Why do you need a hero? You seem like a pretty tough monster."

"There are many tough monsters where I come from, I'm afraid," Bert said. "Monster Planet is crawling with monsters of all shape and size—some of whom are not happy with the Monster Princess." A deep growl crept into his voice. "They've grown violent, and I fear chaos will soon overtake my home."

"Is Earth in trouble too?" Mark asked, shivering.

Bert's whole body shook as he laughed, which was a scary sight in a ten-year-old's bedroom. The monster's scales clacked together with each chuckled, making quite an unusual sound. "Your home is safe. It is protected by Pandora's Box, which itself is kept safe by the Monster Princess herself."

Mark was relieved, but confused. Why would Bert come to Earth looking for a kid, when he could go anywhere in the universe? Surely there were much better heroes on Mars or Pluto. He decided to ask Bert directly. "Why come to Earth then?"

Bert placed his hands on Mark's shoulders and staring into the boy's eyes. "I believe fate brought me here to find you."

"Me?" Now it was Mark's turn to laugh. "There's been some mistake. I'm just a kid."

Bert pointed across the room at something. "Clearly not. Why else would your people entrust you with such a weapon?" Mark spun around. There weren't any weapons in his room, and his mom would kill him if Bert had brought any in with him. He wasn't even allowed to use a letter opener. He turned back, following Bert's finger.

"You mean my bat?" he said.

Bert nodded; finally the human child understood the circumstances that would drive a monster to Earth. "The most powerful weapon known to my people."

"You don't have bats on Monster Planet?"

"They were once...quite common," Bert said, lowering his head. "But the vampires took them all."

Mark sighed and walked to the window. Still no sign of his parents, and the street was eerily quiet. He tried to piece together everything Bert had said. Some place called Monster Planet was in trouble, and the only hope for the good monsters was a little boy with a baseball bat.

"Monsters are scary, Bert."

"You have no need to fear," he said. "If you will help us, I vow to serve you well in combat. No harm will come to you so long as I still breathe fire." Bert extended one finger and his thumb and placed it on his forehead. Mark assumed it was some kind of monster salute, but he couldn't help but laugh at it.

"Wait—you can fly *and* breathe fire?"

Bert's purple face turned a shade redder. "Normally. It's a bit of an issue at the moment."

"But you said you'd keep me safe!" Mark had to admit he was a little disappointed. He'd started to consider the idea of going to another planet. He should have known it was too good to be true.

Bert grew nervous. His mission would be a complete failure if Mark refused. "It's temporary. My people can breathe fire as long as we ingest acetylsalicylic acid. It stimulates our bellows. But the road here was dangerous and my power is spent."

Acetylsali... Mark knew what that was! He'd learned about it in school. "You mean aspirin?" he said. Bert merely blinked. "Hold on, I think there's some in the medicine cabinet." He charged down the hall, leaving Bert to look around the bedroom.

Bert noticed images of many brave heroes covering every inch of the boy's walls. Each a powerful figure, wielding a bat in the heat of battle. This confirmed to Bert he'd come to the right place. The trip to Earth was worth all the hardship. Soon Mark returned, shaking a small bottle.

"Aspirin! Sounds full, too. Here." Bert gladly accepted, twisting off the top. He raised the aspirin above his mouth and emptied the bottle's contents into his mouth. After many loud, crunchy bites, Bert swallowed and smiled, quite pleased. He was powered up and ready for the return trip, which was good because Mark had made up his mind.

"I've decided to help you, Bert." Mark crossed the room and grabbed his bat, a ball, and some other supplies. Stuffing them in his backpack, he turned to his new monster friend. "But I'd like to make one stop on the way."

GAME HINT

The trick to defeating the man-eating flower is to hit its bubbles back at it using the baseball bat.

Chapter 3

Todd Halspur and his buddies huddled under the awning outside the game store, not letting the rain dampen their spirits. They spent most days after school here, watching various people go by and then making fun of them once they passed. They liked the game store because they could intimidate game geeks on the way in, and then again when they left.

There were four in all, but Todd was definitely the ringleader. His dad worked late in some office downtown and his mom was busy with his two younger siblings, so Todd pretty much could do whatever he wanted. This made him seem cool to his henchmen.

They were just about to call it a night when they noticed someone walking toward them through the rain. “That looks like Short Stop, back for more!” Todd shouted. They called Mark Short Stop because of his height and he hated it. But, this time, something was different.

Brian, another of the guys, whispered to Todd. “Is it not raining on the kid?” He was right. And as Mark got closer, it was obvious why—Bert was walking alongside him, with one wing blocking the rain from his head.

“What is that thing?” Todd said, trying to keep his cool in front of the others. “This some kinda joke, Short Stop?”

“I like jokes,” said Bert, stepping beneath a street light so the boys could get a good look at him. “Please tell me one.”

Todd looked at his cronies to make sure he wasn’t the only one seeing the humongous armored bird creature standing next to Mark. They looked back at him like deer in headlights. Brian’s teeth were chattering. “I-tell him a joke.”

“Okay,” said Todd, composing himself. Maybe Mark got his dad to dress up in this costume or something. “Why did Short Stop cross the road?”

“Hm.” Bert considered the question. “Why?”

“B-because it was a *shortcut*.” Todd waited a moment in silence, then forced a chuckle at his joke. Before long, the other three boys forced nervous chuckles of their own. Then a deeper chuckle started, deep in Bert’s throat. It built and built, rolling through the night like a truck driving straight at Todd Halspur. Then the monster opened his mouth.

With each guffaw, tongues of flame curled out of his beaked mouth, smoke billowing up after it and disappearing in the night sky. Bert’s head looked like a furnace—the kind in a basement children are afraid to so much as peek in, and Todd and friends had front row seats.

It didn’t take much longer for all four boys to turn around and run as fast as they could, yelling, screaming, and crying. Mark chased after them, waving his bat above his head and laughing. He wasn’t going to hurt them, and didn’t even really want to scare them so badly, but it felt good to be stronger than those bullies, even for a night. Mark felt like he could do anything. Even save a planet full of monsters.

Bert soon caught up with the boy and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Did we accomplish our errand here?”

Mark smiled at his new monster friend and said, “Yes. That was awesome.”

Bert nodded and continued walking down the street. “I do wonder why you needed my help with those bullies. Were they not afraid of your weapon?”

Mark swung his bat, showing off his powerful skills. How could he explain to Bert that the bat wasn’t actually a weapon at all, and that if he ever swung it at Todd he’d get beaten up worse than usual? “I’ve been putting it off,” Mark said. It was something he wished was true. “But since we’re going away, I thought I should take care of it.”

“Don’t worry,” Bert said. “Time flows in a different direction on my planet. We’ll be able to return at the same moment we leave.”

“Weird,” Mark said offhandedly. They were walking in front of a skyscraper, and he’d never noticed before that it almost looked like it had a face. Something about how the windows were placed made them look like eyes. Big, glassy eyes. And a balcony in the center of the building curved up like a mouth with long columns for teeth. At the moment, it seemed almost like it was moving.

Then it opened its balcony mouth wide, revealing even more teeth—sharp teeth—and its eyes sparkled menacingly. The stairs at the base of the building rippled out of the concrete to form legs, and the building itself tipped over the street as it walked toward Mark.

The skyscraper was alive, and it looked hungry!

GAME HINT

Not every door has something behind it.

Chapter 4

Mark ran as fast as his legs could carry him. It only took Bert doing the same for Mark to know the giant building couldn't be tamed with a little fire breath. As they charged down the town's main street, the building gave chase, and Mark jumped with every booming step. He could hear the monster crushing cars and smashing buildings behind him.

"We have to save my parents!" he shouted to Bert.

"Don't worry," said Bert, sounding a little out of breath. "This isn't actually happening. The monsters of darkness are changing your perception."

"Then why are we running?"

Bert picked Mark up and ducked into an alleyway. He wrapped the boy in his wings so they were talking face to face. It was time he filled Mark in on the dangers they faced. "On Monster Planet, things you cannot see are often the most dangerous."

"Like in a scary movie?" Mark was trying to understand, but his heart was still beating like crazy. He really didn't want to be standing still waiting for that huge building to squash them like tiny bugs.

"When Monsters are nearby, they get inside your head and change what you're seeing." Bert waited for that to sink in. "But if your mind thinks you're squashed..."

"Then I'm squashed for real." Mark gulped. "So it is just like a scary movie." The boy closed his eyes so tight that his face scrunched up like he'd eaten a big sour candy. He told himself there was no giant building monster standing nearby waiting to crunch him. Once he was convinced, he opened his eyes and peered over Bert's shoulder.

Sure enough, there was no giant building monster. But as Mark stared out onto the street, the brick walls of the alley began to melt away. They looked a whole lot like slimy guts now. The street beyond started flowing up and down until it was a giant cement river, and what should

have been a mailbox was now a ghoulish statue with its tongue hanging out. The whole street was melting away!

“What do you see?” Bert asked.

“Um,” Mark said. “Those evil monsters are definitely nearby.”

Bert turned and watched with Mark as small hands rose from the flowing street. “They’re looking for us,” said Bert. The weird gutsy walls were moving too. It was like the entire city had morphed into a giant monster, and it was searching for them. Mark heard a really strange honking noise. Then it happened again, but louder. Whatever was making that noise was getting closer.

Then it darted across the alley’s opening and Mark saw it: a creepy little gremlin on four legs. It looked almost like a dog, but not. Its head was larger and rounder, with smaller ears and a weird short nose. When it turned, it met Mark’s gaze and he saw what the problem was—it had a person’s face! It honked again and charged down the alley just as several more honks sounded from farther off.

“They’re coming,” Bert said. “Which means we should go.”

And with that, Mark and Bert started running again. Mark didn’t dare turn around, but he could hear even more honks join the group. Honk! Honk!

Hooooooooonk!!

Mark slammed into the asphalt before he knew what had happened. Just as quickly as he’d pushed Mark down, Bert picked the boy up. An 18-wheeler had barely missed them as they’d run across the street—luckily it swerved at the last second. The street looked normal again, but Mark had a feeling it wouldn’t last.

“We need to get back to Monster Planet so we can stop this.” Bert said.

“Okay, so how do we do that?” Mark knew anywhere had to be better than being out in the open where those weird honkers could get them. “Fly?”

“No, that would take much too long.” Bert knelt down lifted the cover of a manhole. Stinky air kicked up and hit Mark in the face like the dirty diapers he had to change when he babysat the neighbors’ toddler. Bert motioned into the hole. “There should be a portal in the sewer.”

Chapter 5

They'd been wandering through the sewers for half an hour, and heard scarcely more than distant drips and water rushing through the pipes overhead. It was certainly better than getting chased through city streets by the city itself, but Mark was starting to worry that they were lost. "Hey," Mark said, his voice echoing through the darkness. "Looks like we lost 'em."

"Shhhh..." Bert put a finger to his beak. "They're all around us."

Mark quickly glanced behind them, then to the right and left, but he didn't see anyone. No glowing eyes, no glistening fangs. Nothing at all but walls, pipes, and water. He didn't make a habit of walking around in the sewer, but he was certain nothing here was out of the ordinary. "It looks normal to me."

Bert still appeared very nervous. "We figured them out, so they've taken a different approach," he said. "They've hidden the portal."

Mark stopped in his tracks. "The portal to Monster Planet?"

Bert nodded gravely.

So they'd basically been chased through town, terrorized, and then driven into the stinky, gross sewers for no reason. Mark thought he might have been better off staying home, waiting for his parents to get back. But he knew Bert needed his help, so he'd need to put his attitude in check and do the right thing—as his dad would have said.

"So what do we do now?"

"We look for doors," Bert was already pointing at one on the other side of the water. Between the two of them and the door was an alligator, slowly walking toward them and chomping its enormous jaws.

Mark advanced on the reptile with his bat held high. "At least we can see the monsters again. Does it look scared yet?"

Bert cocked his head to one side. "That's not a monster," he said.

Just then, the alligator snapped at Mark's foot, ready for a tasty snack. Thankfully the boy was able to leap away. Not sure his bat would work on a real alligator, and not excited to test for himself, Mark ran for the door like it was home plate. "Mark, wait!" Bert called from behind him. But the boy didn't hear; getting away from the real life alligator was more important at the moment. He dove through the door without a second thought, finding himself in complete darkness. His eyes adjusted slowly and he realized there was a large figure just in front of him. He stared, willing it into focus, until he could tell what it was: a really big plant.

Growing from an oversized clay pot, its huge stalk stretched up at least two Marks tall. It had enormous leaves to match, and a single bloom with thorns along its petals, which gave it the appearance of an enormous mouth. It was certainly the strangest, and largest, plant Mark had ever seen, but what harm could a plant do?

It was then that Bert burst through the door himself, along with a scent Mark would best describe as burnt alligator. "Are you all right?"

"Sure." Mark wanted to play it cool in hopes Bert would remember he was the future hero of Monster Planet, not a scared kid in a baseball uniform. "Help me look for the portal."

Bert, satisfied that his friend was unharmed, moved back toward the door. "The portal is not here," he said. "We're fortunate that monster did not attack you." He then fell silent, as the door refused to open.

"Monster? You mean the plant?" said Mark, still overflowing with confidence. "Probably just the result of sewer chemicals. What's wrong?" He'd noticed the cracks in Bert's normally calm attitude. The winged monster was tugging at the door knob, but it still refused to budge.

Bert spun around defensively. "Its life force must have sealed the door shut. We must defeat it!"

Mark wondered what his friend had against this plant. It was big, sure, and maybe a little creepy, but it certainly wasn't a monster. Mark decided he would give it a few swats with his bat to make Bert happy, and prove that it never posed a threat. But as the boy turned around, he discovered that toothy bloom had blossomed, and it looked a whole lot more like a mouth now! Why did this keep happening?

Mark slammed his bat into the pink petals. The plant monster recoiled with a bizarre screech.

"Okay, you were right," Mark said. "And we're locked in?"

Bert nodded. "Until we defeat this creature, yes."

The plant's stem swung around the room. Its mouth was foaming over, with bubbles of liquid launching into the air. Mark watched, certain it must be dead. One of the bubbles floated down and burst on his arm, causing a sharp burning to spread down to his wrist. "Ouch! That really hurt, you stupid plant!" he shouted.

Unfazed by the bubble attack, Bert leapt onto the plant's flowering bloom and started tearing away the petals. The flow of bubbles slowed and eventually stopped once every last petal had been ripped away and tossed to the floor. The plant started to wither, and the door opened with a small creak.

Mark collected himself, wiping green stains from his bat onto his pants. He looked like he'd just slid into home four times over. He was glad he'd survived, but was a little ashamed he hadn't been more help in the fight. He knew he had to up his game before Bert had second thoughts—maybe with the next monster.

Back in the sewer tunnels, Bert rushed from one passage to the next and Mark struggled to keep up. They climbed ladders, dropped through holes, and even squeezed through some pipes until finally coming to a large open chamber: the sewage treatment area. Mark realized it had been some time since they'd seen a monster, but he now knew better than to say so out loud. He hoped they were closer to finding the portal than another nasty surprise.

Almost on cue, Bert put a hand on Mark's shoulder. "It should be through that door," he said. Sure enough, down some stairs in the center of the room was another small door. It looked exactly like the one that led to the plant, but Bert seemed positive.

As they got closer, though, the water all around them started bubbling. Apparently the monsters were there too, and they'd prepared another ghoulish surprise. Without further conversation, Mark and Bert began to sprint toward the door, desperate to reach it before anything could emerge from the water.

Mark's curiosity got the better of him, and he glanced sideways, only to see a Merman emerge from the water. But this wasn't like a cartoon mermaid, with the body of a human on top of a fish tail. In fact, this creature was like the opposite of a mermaid; a thick-lipped, gasping fish mouth, enormous gills, and big round eyes perched atop spindly legs. Soon Mark and Bert were surrounded by reverse mermen, each one making very strange bub-bub noises. The water splashed and roiled as the creatures flapped their under-developed flippers.

“Faster!” Bert shouted in Mark’s ear, refocusing him on the door ahead. Mark resolved to stand up to the next monster they came across; these reverse mermen were far too numerous—and a little bit sad, if he was being honest. They didn’t seem like they could actually hurt the pair, especially not Bert with his armored skin, but Mark didn’t want to smell fishy for the rest of his adventure.

The door slammed shut behind him and Bert. The boy put his hands on his knees and breathed in huge gasping breaths. Eager to see the portal to Monster Planet, he looked around the room, but aside from him and Bert, the only thing in the room was a well. The same kind as in the movies—round gray stones at its base, and a wooden scaffold with a rope hanging down for a bucket.

“This won’t do.” Bert was pacing back and forth. “This won’t do at all.”

“Wrong room again?” Mark said. He walked over and looked inside the well, finding just water. He splashed it with his hand to be sure.

Outside, the reverse mermen were banging against the door making their bub-bub sounds. With the sheer number of creatures out there, it wouldn’t be long before they broke through and spilled into the room like, well, thousands of fish.

“This is the correct room,” said Bert, sounding a little hurt. “But the evil monsters must have sealed the portal.” Bert turned to the well and motioned for Mark to step back. The monster kicked the well as hard as he could, but nothing happened. He even tried blowing a little fire, but that just heated the water—and even then only a little bit.

“This sucks,” said Mark as he sat down on the ground. He imagined the flood of reverse mermen busting through the door. “I’ll try to hit as many of those creatures as I can, but they’d give Pete Rose a run for his money—and he’s made 4,256 hits in his career.”

There was a rumbling far below the chamber, and the well itself shuddered—almost flickering out of sight for a moment. It barely lasted a moment before everything returned to normal, with only the sloshing of the well’s water to show it had happened at all.

“What did you do?” Bert said. “What is a Pete Rose?”

“He’s a baseball player.” Mark didn’t know what this had to do with anything.

Bert looked quizzically at Mark, suspecting the boy may not even realize the power at his disposal. Something about his words had lifted the curse on the portal, if only for a second. Of course! Bert practically

danced about the room. “I understand now! I told you these were monsters of deception; of tricks and untruths, did I not?”

“Kinda,” said Mark.

“Your baseball facts are just the opposite!” He laughed a powerful monster laugh. “They can’t continue twisting reality when faced with these truths!” Bert moved back to the well. “Go on, tell me more about baseball.”

It was hard to believe, and Mark’s head spun too quickly to settle on specific trivia. This could really help fight the monsters? The facts he’d memorized for years watching documentaries with his dad? Mark calmed himself. This was the perfect moment to prove his worth. He thought hard. “The first world series was played in 1903...between Boston and Pittsburgh.”

The room jumped, almost as if someone had kicked it. The rumbling felt closer. Something was trying to break free. The well had started hissing, its shape covered in what Mark would compare to television static. He could hear the fishmen outside fleeing, splashing back into the sewer water in attempts to swim far away.

“Um, Boston won the series, 5-3.”

There was a blinding flash of light and a noise so loud it set Mark’s ears ringing. He shut his eyes but could still only see white. Eventually the noise died down and the room darkened again, and it was several moments before Mark could focus his eyes. But, once he did, he saw that the well was gone—replaced by the portal to Monster Planet.

“That was brilliant!” said Bert in a hushed tone. “Shall we?”

Chapter 6

The portal sent them to a strange cavern. Strange because rather than being underground, as one would assume a cavern would be, this one seemed to run through the sky. One wall of the passage opened into the air, from which Mark could see mountains running far into the distance. Above the range, lightning slashed across a red sky. Each bolt lit up the cavern, casting bizarre shadows that set the boy's imagination spinning. From what Bert had told him about evil monsters, that was probably the point.

Now that he was on Monster Planet, Mark should have been scared stiff. After all, this was no place for a kid—what they'd witnessed back on Earth didn't compare. However, after finding out his knowledge of baseball trivia gave them an edge over the forces of darkness, Mark was filled with a new confidence.

The legions of skeletons that lived in this cavern didn't faze Mark at all; his trusty bat made short work of their brittle bones, and he had a few home runs hits knocking monster skulls out of the park, tumbling through the open wall into the mountain range below. "Grow a backbone!" he said after one such instance.

Though Bert didn't understand all the strange things Mark said, he was glad to see the boy living up to his potential as a hero. It was, after all, why he'd chosen him to begin with. Indeed, the cave skeletons were small fries in the monster world so Bert easily destroyed four or so at a time with just his claws.

During a lull in the skeleton bashing, they leaned against the rocky side of the cave and took a breather. Mark picked up a stray knee bone, tossed it in the air, and sent it flying with his bat. "This is pretty fun," he said.

"Yes, for now." Bert seemed far away, pondering the journey ahead. "The portal took us to the foot of the evil monsters' territory. Our trials will grow more difficult."

Mark didn't know why Bert had to be so serious all the time. He had so many questions about this planet and where all the monsters came from. He decided talking about it might distract Bert a little. "So there's a difference between evil monsters and normal monsters?"

"Yes, a big difference." If Bert knew Mark was attempting to distract him, it didn't show. He relaxed a little and began to explain further. "Long ago, the Monster Princess created many different monster clans. For many years, they worked together to develop a civilization. But then, some of the clans changed."

He paused to make sure it wasn't too much for Mark to take in, but the boy was sitting at attention, enthralled by the story.

"Some of the clans joined together, led by a vile monster known as the Dark World Master. He is a cruel being, obsessed with chaos and violence."

Bert took a breath. Telling this part of the story was clearly hard for him.

"The clans who followed him turned against our civilization, believing monsters were above laws and order. Their master taught them deception, and gave them the power to warp reality. The other clans have been at war with their kind ever since."

Mark felt bad for making Bert relive those memories. "Sorry," he said. He had to lighten the mood somehow, but nothing came to mind. Mark decided to ask what he hoped was a much simpler question. "So what clan are you from?"

"My people are called Gargoyles." That question seemed to do the trick as Bert perked up and beamed with pride. "We are descended from a noble warrior—one who fought bravely and defeated many evil monsters when they first rebelled against the Monster Princess."

"He sounds awesome!" Mark thought Bert himself was really brave and strong already, so a Gargoyle that even Bert looked up to sounded unreal. "I bet he had a rad name, like Firetongue, or Redbrand!"

"His name was Steve," said Bert.

Mark was disappointed. "Really? Steve sounds...well it sounds so ordinary."

Bert nodded in agreement. "It's a common name among my people." But he wasn't stupid; Mark's tone told Bert exactly what the boy meant. "We are from different worlds, so it's natural for our names to sound strange to you. Where, for example, does your name come from?"

Mark was starting to regret he asked anything at all. This whole conversation had gone to a very strange place, and considering they were standing in a big sky cave that was saying something. “Uh,” Mark said. “My parents just gave it to me, I guess.”

“Ah yes, before they left.”

“*What!?*” Several emotions exploded inside of the boy, and he could feel anger growing at the back of his neck. What kind of thing was that to assume, that his parents had abandoned him? “Of course they didn’t leave! Why would you say that?”

Mark must have been even angrier than he thought, because Bert took a few steps back. The monster’s purple cheeks glowed red in embarrassment. “I apologize if I have upset you,” he said. “But I did not see anyone else in your home.”

“Th-they were just out getting dinner or something!” Mark knew that probably wasn’t the case, with how often they’d been arguing lately. But he didn’t want to guess where they might actually be, or if they were even both in the same place. But, he could also tell Bert hadn’t meant anything. He suddenly felt bad about getting so angry. “Human parents don’t abandon their kids.”

“Interesting.” Bert was honestly intrigued. “Gargoyle parents leave the nest quite early, and the hatchlings must fend for themselves. It seems our worlds are quite different.”

While Bert certainly seemed lightened up, the conversation had left Mark more out of sorts than he’d hoped. Maybe it was for the best they got back to the mission. “So what do we need to do here?”

Bert stood to full height, stretching his wings and loosening up for more skeleton bashing. “Our path through their territory will be blocked by magic barriers.”

“Like the well, back in the sewer?”

Bert considered this. “Something like that. Only to pass these barriers, we must defeat the Monster Bosses that have sealed the area. Their lairs will be hidden behind doors, like you’ve seen.”

Mark picked up his bat and slung it over his shoulder. He put the weird conversation behind him and was ready to kick some evil monster butt. “Let’s do this, partner!” He held up his palm for a high five.

Bert mirrored the boy’s gesture. They stood there a moment, both their arms raised.

Mark’s face fell, “Nevermind.”

“I believe that’s a door up ahead,” said Bert, and they were off.

GAME HINT

One of the bosses is a dead lizard. Since he's already dead, you can claim your prize without much effort.

Chapter 7

Behind each door was a different type of monster. They fought Vampires and Frankensteins, and dozens of other creepy crawlies. Each time Bert would take the monster on directly, while Mark shouted out a baseball fact like Sammy Sosa's birthday, or that Barry Bonds set the single-season home run record at 73.

This generally shattered the monsters' defenses, allowing Mark and Bert to double team them with their attacks. They made a great team, but it seemed like no matter how many doors they tried and all the monsters they defeated, they were no closer to the next step of their journey.

Before long, though, they came to a large door with an ornately carved frame. There were inscriptions all along the frame written in what Bert identified as Monsterese. He refused, however, to tell Mark exactly what the words said. Mark considered asking if that made it the Monster equivalent of an Earth men's room, but doubted Bert would get the joke.

"This is it," Bert said. "The final boss of this area. He's sure to be powerful! The other monsters we've defeated took their orders from him."

"Don't worry," Mark winked, encouraged by their string of victories. "I can recite the teams that played in every World Series."

They opened the door and walked through. Like the other boss chambers, this one was incredibly dark. They looked around, waiting to see what form this particular creature would take. The air fell cold, and Mark could see his breath. He shivered, but convinced himself it was because of the temperature.

"Good work getting this far," said an eerie voice that echoed through the darkness. It was a deep voice, like the ones Mark had heard in spook houses at amusement parks. "But you'll never get out of these caverns alive." The voice had changed somehow, it was higher, like a devious chipmunk.

“Show yourself, beast,” Bert shouted back. He didn’t seem worried, so Mark tried to stay brave as well. He started to recite his world series data.

“1903, Boston and Pittsburgh!”

The Boss Monster appeared from out of the shadows. Its body was a glowing white sheet, like a cheap Halloween ghost costume. Its head, though, was a huge jack-o-lantern with a jagged grin. “Already heard that one!” Its deep booming voice shook the room.

“How about this!?” Mark was just getting started. “1905, New York and Philadelphia!”

The monster’s giant pumpkin head spun violently, revealing a second face carved into the back side. This one had crescent moon eyes and a shocked expression. “Don’t be mean to me,” it said before cackling like a crazy person in its higher pitch. It was almost as if this monster was two monsters, and Mark could only speak to one at a time.

“1906, White Sox and Cubs...”

It flipped around again.

The boss kept laughing, and with each fact it would simply swap heads, and the laughter would continue in a different voice. At around 1912 mark stopped quoting. He leapt out of the way as the boss reached forward with a ghastly claw. He spotted Bert on the other side of the creature and realized that whichever head wasn’t facing him was facing Bert. This monster could fight them both at the same time!

“What do we do?” Mark called across the room.

“What do we do?” said the moon face, mocking him. Then its head flipped around to the jagged mouth face, “You lose!” it said.

“I was afraid of this,” Bert said, breathing fire that the boss seemed to shrug off. “They’re learning our strategies and adapting. Each monster we face will be smarter than the last.”

Mark swung, but sprained his arm as the bat moved right through the creature’s body like it wasn’t there at all. It really was a ghost. “So my trivia won’t work?”

Bert flew high up in the air to get a better view. “Only the face you’re talking to will be affected by your attack, so they keep swapping to avoid listening.” Mark frowned and backed into a corner. There was no way to fight this thing with words, unless he could throw them around behind it like boomerangs. That gave him an idea.

“Quick, pick me up,” Mark said, running out to the center of the room again, narrowly dodging another claw attack. As Bert circled and swooped low down to the ground, Mark leapt into his arms. The pair rose back up as high as they could in the cramped chamber. As they ascended, Mark whispered his plan in Bert’s ear.

“We can’t hear you!” bellowed the pumpkin monster. It laughed harder.

“Sorry,” Mark said to the boss. “We’ll have to speak up!”

Bert took a deep breath and then shouted as loud as he could. “1913, Philadelphia and New York!”

His booming monster voice shook the room, echoing off every wall. His voice was coming from every direction. He kept shouting the baseball stats Mark whispered in his ear, year after year.

The pumpkin head spun uselessly back and forth—but no matter which direction it turned, the facts bounced right back in its faces. “S-stop,” it begged. It stumbled to the ground. “We can’t take it!”

Mark leapt off of Bert’s back with the bat held high above his head. He drove the bat downward, and as he landed it smashed right through the pumpkin. Its head cracked in two and the halves exploded outward. They rolled along the floor of the cavern. Mark was a little disappointed; he’d expected there to at least be gooey pumpkin guts and seeds, but it appeared that the monster’s head was hollow. Its bed sheet body started glowing, and after a moment a new portal appeared.

Bert flapped down from the upper reaches of the chamber to stand next to Mark. “If these monsters are as smart as you say,” said the boy, “you’d think they would know by now that we’re a super team!”

Bert raised one hand, palm facing out, in an awkward recreation of Mark’s high five setup. It was too much—this monster had plenty to learn, himself. Mark sighed and said, “So much for these caves. What’s next?”

Chapter 8

Sweat poured off of Mark's forehead in waves. He wasn't sure how he could feel so wet on the outside but dry on the inside. He and Bert found themselves inside an ancient pyramid—or at least that's what it would have been called on Earth. On Monster Planet, who knew. It was certainly as hot as Egypt.

The fire whizzing by their heads didn't help—a swarm of giant scorpions had emerged from cracks in the walls and buffeted the pair with a shower of fireballs. Each one sent a burst of heat right into Mark's face. He swung his bat, nailing one and sending it flying back to a scorpion. The creature squealed as it got a taste of its own medicine and fell to the floor, where it scurried into the shadows.

Bert pulled Mark around a corner and they took a breather behind the column. Mark's breath came in ragged gasps. When he'd calmed down enough to speak, he turned to Bert. "Why don't you use your fire breath? You know, fight fire with fire."

"I'm afraid I'm out," Bert said, blushing the same way he had at Mark's house. "I used the last of it against the pumpkin head."

Mark had worried this would happen. Sure, Bert had swallowed an entire bottle of aspirin, but that was only a temporary solution. On a journey this long Bert would be using fire breath a lot, and that meant he'd need more than a single bottle. Mark felt bad about every time the monster had needed to save him. If only Mark had been stronger in the beginning, maybe they'd be doing better now. Bert seemed to sense his thoughts, and perked up. "Don't worry Mark," he said. "We'll get through this."

As if on cue, a nearby sarcophagus rumbled to life. Its lid slid off easily, revealing a decayed mummy. The mummy's eyes opened, as did its mouth—gross green tongue lolling out and everything. It moaned something unintelligible and lumbered toward the pair.

Mark stepped forward, choking his hands further on his bat. He was starting to adjust to creepy monsters advancing toward him, and that probably wasn't normal. He charged toward the bandaged baddie, shouting Mickey Mantle's stats. He swung his bat into what would have been the ribcage of a more recently embalmed Egyptian mummy. A cloud of dust exploded into Mark's face, blinding him and making his nose burn like fire. He dropped his bat and clutched his chest in a coughing fit.

Two bandages spun out of the mummy's arms, unspooling toward the bat Mark had dropped on the cold bricks of the tomb. Bert charged forward with a roar, but couldn't reach the monster before its fabric tendrils wrapped around the bat and brought it to bare, swinging it dangerously. Bert dodged the weapon and stood out of reach, keeping an eye on Mark, still incapacitated by the dust.

"Mark!" Bert shouted. "Try to say another baseball truth."

Mark kept coughing. "It's no good," he said between hacks. "It didn't seem to hear me before!" He vaguely remembered his teachers saying something about mummies having their ears filled with wax. That must have been it—the mummy couldn't hear him. "Its ears," he coughed. "We have to unplug its ears—I've got a good one." Mark rolled away as his own bat slammed into the ground, barely missing his head.

Bert understood perfectly. He leapt high, claws reaching for the mummy. It swung the bat sideways, clocking Bert across the face. He fell to the ground, armor clattering against the floor. He forced himself back up, unwilling to let the quest end here. Mark was depending on him. Another blow cracked against his shoulder, a second striking his wing.

The attacks came fast, bandages fluttering, filling the room. The mummy itself still seemed lifeless, standing in the center of the room, letting its bindings do its dirty work.

In a last desperate attempt, Bert faked to the right, then tucked his wings close and spun to the left. It worked—the bat missed him by a wide margin. He dove toward the mummy itself, wrapping one claw around its head and the other arm around its body. He pulled.

The mummy's head tore right off with a sickening rip. Bert heard a strange whispering from inside it. "Mark, now!"

Mark sprinted toward the mummy. Fortunately it was too occupied with the enormous Gargoyle to notice a small human child. He leapt onto the mummy's back and put his face into its neck hole.

He shouted the other thing about Egypt he remembered from school. "Baseball has origins in Ancient Egypt!"

As soon as Mark finished his statement, the mummy collapsed in on itself. The boy fell to the hard ground, only a pile of bandages to break his fall. He looked at Bert, then surveyed the room, which was lined with white fabric, just like the garage that time Todd Halspur and his cronies toilet-papered Mark's house. Reminded of how simple things were on Earth, Mark started laughing. Confused, but relieved, by the show of happiness, Bert joined in the laughter too.

Chapter 9

The heat made it difficult to jump back up after such an exhausting battle, so the pair remained on the pile of bandages for a few moments, collecting their thoughts. It was Mark who spoke first. "What is this place, anyway?"

"Monster Planet, of course."

Mark explained what he meant, about the pyramids and what ancient Egypt was like on Earth, and the eerie similarities. He got up and walked around the room, pointing out all the things he'd learned about in school. All the ornaments around the mummy's chamber, the sarcophagi, and the jars full of...well, the jars.

Bert followed Mark intently, taking note of all the curious theories that Earth scientists had about the civilization and its origins. They spent an extended period in front of a series of hieroglyphics depicting tall creatures with animal heads taking part in various ceremonies, tasks, and events.

"I still doubt there's a connection," Bert said. He sounded different though, so Mark figured he was hiding something. He stared at his friend, letting the Gargoyle know he knew there was more. "Yes, some monsters from this sector vanished many, many years ago. They shared many of the same rituals you are describing, but they couldn't possibly have traveled to earth."

"How can you be so sure?" Mark said.

"Well, for one, they had a very large cat-like creature with them. Someone on Earth would certainly have noticed that."

They discussed it for several more minutes before shifting gears to talk about Monster Planet as a whole. "Why do we have to search for portals? Why can't we just walk to the castle?" Mark asked, frankly a little tired of all the searching. There were so many doors that finding the right one was quite the headache.

“Oh, we can’t walk,” Bert seemed shaken. “The areas between each sector are harsh and inhospitable. Even the Evil Monsters fear what lurks out in the wildlands.” He stared off, clearly understanding just how bad it must be. “Unfortunately, in the time I was gone they rechanneled each portal, so I have no idea the proper order.”

“Bummer.” Mark figured they had time for one more question. “Say, how do you get your fire breath back?” From the expression on Bert’s face, Mark knew he was about to launch into the same explanation he’d given back home, at the start of the adventure. He redirected the question. “I mean, I know how, but how do you normally do it? When you don’t have a bottle of aspirin?”

“Ah, yes,” Bert said. “The home sector of my people is built around a large mountain. From that mountain flows a warm spring. Drinking from it gives us our power.” Bert frowned, realizing how long it had been since he returned home. “I suspect that’s the reason they changed the portals—to lock away sectors such as mine.”

“Yeah, I guess we won’t find water from that mountain anywhere around here.” But Mark couldn’t shake something from their earlier conversations about Egypt and burial rituals, and those jars. Among other things, the Egyptians kept sacred herbs and things near their mummies. He had an idea, and ran along the walls, looking at everything a second time.

He got distracted by some scary-looking hieroglyphics depicting a huge creature—bigger than the others—with what looked like a cow’s head. “What’s that?” he said, hoping Bert knew.

“That’s one of their champions, I think,” said Bert. “Maybe their biggest.”

A thunderous bellow echoed through the chamber. “MOOOOOOOOOOVE IT!” it shouted. The source of the voice, and the drawing, crashed to the floor, sending several bricks flying into the air and then falling back to the ground, broken. Before Mark and Bert stood a towering, cow-headed Minotaur. “That’s my favorite drawing,” it said. “And I don’t want to risk smashing you into it.” It swung an enormous axe in circles above its head and bellowed again.

Mark had absolutely no idea how he could hurt the Minotaur. For one, its hide looked incredibly thick—maybe thicker than Bert’s. On top of that, it was wearing even thicker armor. As powerful a weapon as his wooden baseball bat seemed to these monsters, there was no way it could get through those defenses. He decided the best thing to do would be to act as bait, shouting trivia and trusting Bert to come up with something.

“Want to hear about Mickey Mantle’s RBI record?” he shouted in his best action movie voice. It didn’t even register to the beast, who was still yelling. Each time he took a step, there was a crashing sound. There was too much noise for a child’s voice to cut through. Mark realized this must have been intentional. Each boss monster they fought was better equipped to deal with his baseball facts. They may have been weak to the truth, but if they never had to face it, what good would it do?

He and Bert were going to have to be more clever. But first they’d need to get out of this pyramid alive, and that seemed less and less likely as the Minotaur’s axe grazed past Mark.

Bert set about his own strategy—leaping onto the Minotaur’s arm and attempting to wrest the axe from its grasp. He clawed and scratched, eventually biting the creature’s hand. This did little but anger it, and after the bite the Minotaur mooded enormously and tossed Bert into the opposite wall. The creature then turned its attention to Mark.

The wall Bert hit was lined with jars, and his body shattered every one of them. He rubbed his head and looked around. Amidst the broken glass were all kinds of gross things—just what you’d expect in a mummy’s tomb. But there was something else; Bert could smell it. Something important. As he sifted through the glass, Mark was dodging the Minotaur’s many attacks. The crash its axe made with every strike was giving the boy panic attacks.

Fortunately, it didn’t take Bert long to find what he’d smelled. He held up a handful of dried herbs. “Mark! I found it!”

Mark looked and instantly recognized the contents of the Gargoyle’s hand: willow bark and myrtle. They were both from trees his mother grew in the back yard. Of course! They were also what the ancient Egyptians used as aspirin. “Awesome!” Mark said, but his mood dipped a bit as a giant hoof crashed down just a few feet away. “But eat it fast, okay?”

Bert didn’t need permission; he’d already scarfed half the bottle, and was going back for seconds. He could feel the fire building inside of him, reaching up through his throat. He opened his beak and shouted, even louder than the bull-headed beast they were fighting. Fire streamed from Bert’s mouth and toasted the Minotaur. Soon all that remained was his axe, and above it the portal to their next destination.

Bert helped Mark to his feet, looking stronger and happier than he had in a while. He tucked the extra herbs into a pouch on his belt.

Mark dusted off his bat and took one final look around the chamber. “I’m about ready for Egypt to be history.”

“Is it not? The way you explained things—”

“Come on, Bert,” Mark said.

GAME HINT

You can only use Bert's power by collecting the pills you find by defeating enemies. He'll flash when he's about to disappear--that's your warning to find more pills.

Chapter 10

Mark opened his eyes to a surprising sight: a dense forest, backed by blue skies. They were next to a pristine blue river that flowed along and into the woods. They'd been dropped onto one of many white, stony outcroppings that jutted out from the river at regular intervals.

The river looked inviting; glassy, cool water rippling as far as the eye could see. After the sweltering heat of the pyramid sector, there was only one thing on Mark's mind. He made his way across the stones to the edge of the water and was just about to plunge his face into the river when Bert picked him up with one clawed hand.

"I believe I told you not to trust your senses on Monster Planet. Look," Bert said, pointing upstream a ways. There, floating listlessly in the water, was the skeleton of a fish.

"Whoa!" Mark dropped from Bert's arms and backed into the dead center of the outcropping. He watched in horror as the dead fish turned and seemed to be watching them. It most definitely was watching, as it kicked its tail fin and swam straight for them! It leapt out of the water, directly at Mark, who was still in a bit of shock about nearly shoving his face into a river of acid. Bert swiped a razor-sharp talon through the air and cut it in half. Its head landed at Mark's feet, one empty eye socket staring up at him.

"We'll need to be careful," Bert said. "The river is full of those things." Sure enough, every few feet there was a skeleton fish, swimming carefully in place, dead eyes looking who knows where. Mark fell onto his back and tried to calm down.

"Thanks for stopping me," he said between gasps.

Bert walked over, picked Mark up, and gripped the boy tightly. Mark wasn't sure about the sudden show of affection, but it made sense moments later, as Bert began to leap from outcropping to outcropping, fluttering his wings to ensure they landed safely. "It would have been a bad way to end your journey." Just a few more jumps, and they were

safely in the woods. Bert placed Mark safely back on solid ground, and they started creeping through the trees.

“Hey Bert,” Mark said. “There’s something I wanted to bring up.” The Gargoyle grunted, which Mark took as his signal to go ahead, but as they parted the next set of trees they stumbled into a clearing. It wasn’t an empty clearing—there appeared to be some kind of festival, with a stage, food carts, carnival games...the whole nine.

But it was the stage that captured Mark’s attention; on it were two zombies, complete with tattered clothes and weird, melty skin. It looked as if they’d fallen victim to the water Mark almost shoved his face into. A strange song began, and the two zombies broke into a dance.

Bert leaned close to Mark, understanding the element of surprise. “Those are the bosses,” he said. “We’ll need to defeat them.”

Mark did a closer scan of the situation. Just as he suspected—the zombies had no ears. They must have melted away in whatever unfortunate accident created them. “My trivia won’t work on these guys.”

“Well we cannot attack them,” Bert pointed at the zombies, as if Mark wasn’t already looking straight at them. He was so strange sometimes. “They’re composed of the same stuff as the water. Look at their skin.” Sure enough, not only was it melted, but it glistened as if wet.

So if fighting them head-on was out, the only way to defeat them would be a hard dose of truth. But, without ears there was no way they could hear anything Mark had to say. Bert probably couldn’t even roar really loud to scare them. All of their options were accounted for; this whole clearing stank like a trap. In fact, this whole sector seemed like a trap, with the acid water and now these zombies. There was no way this was all a coincidence; these challenges were being crafted by somebody. Maybe the Dark World Master himself.

Lost in thought, Mark barely noticed as the music wound down and the zombies slowed their dance. Bert nudged him back to the present and pointed, once again, at the stage. The zombies glanced around in the silence. As it slowly dawned on them the music had stopped, their mouths turned down in bizarre, rotting versions of a frown.

The reality of their situation was apparently too much for the zombies to bear, and they melted into nothing. The trees in the forest flickered, the ground shook, and when everything cleared the festival vanished. In the distance Mark could see a huge mansion towering above the tree line. They’d “defeated” the zombie bosses.

GAME HINT

You'll defeat enemies a lot faster if you reflect their projectiles using the baseball bat.

Chapter 11

A thick mist hung over the area and each step Mark took felt heavier. He called through the fog for Bert, but didn't hear an answer. He couldn't hear much of anything, actually; he could only keep walking, one step at a time, pressing forward through the mists.

He started hearing strange voices in the distance. They were small at first, moaning and calling out. Soon they were all around him. Moving closer and closer, the voices got louder and more desperate. Mark couldn't understand what they were saying, but he understood the meaning of their cries. These were the many victims of the Dark World Master and his armies of evil monsters.

The cold mist stung Mark's cheeks. But suddenly the area, wherever it was, grew warm. Really warm. Warmer than the Egypt sector. The mist felt heavy and oppressive, and it choked Mark as he breathed it in. A single sinister voice cut through the din of the others like a knife. It bored into Mark, feeling him from the inside.

"You must be Mark," it said. The boy spun around, searching for the source of the voice. He didn't recognize it, but he could guess whose it was. The mists glowed a creepy green tint. It was impossible to see, but Mark stared into the darkness anyway. He had to figure out where he was and who was speaking. The fog gathered, and Mark could just barely make out a face—twisted and cruel, its eyes hollow and its enormous mouth, full of teeth, plastered with a terrible grin. But it wasn't just one face—the longer Mark stared, the more faces appeared, all the same. Hundreds, no, thousands of faces stared back at Mark from every angle. And they all spoke at once. "You think you're *sooo* smart."

"You're the Dark World Master," Mark said. He couldn't be sure of course, but it made sense. The faces all laughed at once.

"You are perceptive," said the faces. "But that doesn't make you smart. Your precious 'trivia' will be meaningless before long."

“Oh yeah?” Mark gripped his bat. He certainly wouldn’t be able to hurt a thousand faces made of mist, but the baseball facts were on deck. “Did you know Cal Ripken Jr. played 2,632 consecutive games?”

Another laugh boomed out from the thousand mouths. The Dark World Master certainly didn’t seem too bothered by Earth sports trivia. “Adorable,” the mouths sneered back. “Why would that mean anything to me, when it doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“I love baseball!”

“Yes, that may be,” scoffed the faces, moving closer—uncomfortably close. “But I know other things about you. Secret things.” The mouths opened wide, gaping, swallowing Mark up. “I know you. You want to escape.” Thousands of eyes narrowed. “This is your last chance. Turn back now, and I’ll let you live.”

“Why let me go?” Mark said with as much defiance as he could muster. “Why not use your crazy reality powers to trap me in a cage? Or crush me or something?”

Mark knew the Dark World Master had to be the one creating the different sectors they’d encountered. All the different obstacles and monsters had to come from somewhere. So if he really was surrounding Mark, why was he just talking? It’s almost like he was trying to scare Mark away.

“You aren’t actually here,” Mark said, grinning. “None of this is actually happening! I’m dreaming!”

“Is that so?” asked the voices. But Mark had already seen it. As soon as he realized, the faces faltered. The mists parted, and a wind kicked up to blow them away.

“Yes!” Mark yelled, no longer scared of the Dark World Master—at least not this long distance dream version of him. “And I want to wake up!”

Chapter 12

Mark woke up with a start in the clearing where they'd watched the zombies dance. It appeared to be morning, or whatever that meant in this weird place. The sun was rising above the tree line, and it was beginning to warm up.

The boy rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stretched. Bert wasn't next to him anymore, so he assumed the Gargoyle had gone in search of something. Sure enough, Bert appeared through the trees a few minutes later with a handful of what appeared to be food. "Chicken fingers!?" Mark couldn't believe it. "Where'd you find those?"

"These fried creatures are quite common on Monster Planet," said Bert, handing the boy the chicken, along with an onion ring. "Do you have them on Earth, as well?"

"Uh, sort of," Mark took a tentative bite. Yup, it tasted exactly like a normal chicken finger. "Thanks."

Bert seemed pleased. "That mansion beyond the forest is our next destination. We should be going."

"Sounds good." Mark walked alongside Bert, munching on his tasty fried breakfast. He finished the fingers, then wiped the grease off on his baseball uniform. "So, Bert, about that thing I mentioned yesterday..."

"Oh yes, you mentioned wanting to talk about something."

"It's just, I think there's a pattern to these sectors." Mark didn't wait for Bert to respond. He'd had this thought rattling around in his head so long he just wanted to get it out. "Think about it, that Pyramid sector was exactly like ancient Egypt. It was all about heat. Then we came to this sector, which was full of water—but drinking it would melt our faces. And the bosses looked like they'd been melted too."

"Interesting," Bert was sizing the theory up in his mind. "But what would that accomplish?"

“I think they’re studying us. Like, each sector has a purpose, and as we get past it, they adjust the next one to be harder.” Mark’s voice got louder and louder. He was growing excited, hearing his theory out loud. Bert was sure to agree.

“This does sound like something the Dark World Master would do,” Bert said. “I’d hoped he wasn’t aware of our presence, but that seems foolish now.”

“Yeah, he definitely knows,” Mark said. And he proceeded to tell Bert all about the dream he’d had, about the strange laughing faces and everything they said to him.

Bert considered the dream. “This is good.”

“Good? The biggest monster in the universe shows up in my dreams and it’s good?” Mark wasn’t sure Bert had been paying close enough attention after all. “He said I can’t hurt him! My trivia won’t work!”

Bert didn’t seem moved. “Yes. He revealed you have a weakness, which we can now overcome. Do you know the answer to his question? Why you depend on baseball facts? Or what you might be trying to escape?”

“No, I have no idea.” Mark was frustrated. It was one thing for your opponent to get inside your head, and another when he was literally inside of your head. “I’ve always studied baseball stuff. It’s fun.”

“What about your room?” Bert asked. “You had a lot of baseball things there. On the walls and such. Was there a way to escape behind your posters, perhaps?”

“Escape? That’s crazy!” Mark had hoped his new friend would be more supportive. He was acting like this new development was Mark’s fault. “Houses aren’t built like that.”

“What about your parents? Are you trying to escape them?”

Mark stopped in his tracks. “Why would you even say that!?”

Bert didn’t understand the outburst. “Why are you upset?”

“I’m upset about *this*. How could you, Bert? I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends. I was trying to help. But you left Earth without saying goodbye, so I assumed—“

“I left Earth because you needed my help!” Mark started jogging away. “You know what? I’ll figure out how to beat Dark World Master myself!” He was off running, straight toward the huge mansion.

“It’s unlikely you’ll defeat him by yourself!” shouted Bert. A few moments later he realized that might not have been the most helpful statement, and followed after Mark.

However, the boy had a huge head start, and he was sprinting now. Tears streaming down his face, he darted toward the huge front doors of the mansion without thinking. He barged right in and charged across the marble floors behind it.

With a big sniff, Mark stopped running and wiped his eyes. The mansion door shut with a creak and a loud slam. It probably wasn’t wise to go charging off without Bert; a large Gargoyle was a good thing to have around, and friends were even harder to find. Mark regretted his outburst. He should have been more honest about his feelings. He’d go back out and wait for Bert, and then apologize.

Mark walked toward the door and turned the knob. It opened a lot easier than he expected. However, once he’d stepped through he found something very strange—he was still inside the mansion. It was a completely different room. He turned around and went through the door again—yet another room, different from how it had looked originally.

Trapped in a haunted mansion. Mark had really done it this time.

GAME HINT

To defeat the dancing zombies, you have to stand there and do nothing until they tire themselves out.

Chapter 13

Well, thought Mark, this was definitely a bad situation. Not only had he run away from the only thing keeping him alive in this crazy place, but now he was in a giant haunted mansion whose doors took him to random locations. Even if Bert followed him in, there's no guarantee they'd ever find one another. This was probably what the Dark World Master wanted, and Mark walked right into his clutches.

Figuring he couldn't just sit around waiting, Mark tried a few doors. Each led to a new hallway, or chamber, or room with other doors. He found one spot that seemed really nice, with a large fireplace, chandelier, and some nice comfy chairs. It would actually be pleasant, if it wasn't on Monster Planet, in a creepy haunted house. Mark almost considered taking a seat.

Luckily he thought better of it, motivated partly by the chairs vibrating and traveling across the carpeted floor toward him. Then a table rumbled across too. Mark took a swing at the first chair, knocking an arm off it in a shower of splinters. It slowed its shaking a little bit, but persisted. Three more home run swings and Mark had reduced it to a pile of wood and upholstery, and it stopped.

The rest of the furniture was still coming, along with some portraits that flew off the walls, spinning through the air. Those were easy pitches. Mark was about to get cornered by the others, though. Thinking fast, he ran up one of the chairs, hopped off the table, and made for the door. It was like the greatest pillow fight escape of his life.

Unfortunately, like the others, the door led to another hallway. However, this hallway happened to be home to the most frightening sight Mark had beheld in his life. Soundlessly walking down the hall was a pair of pants. No body, no feet, just a pair of jeans that could walk on its own.

Mark figured this was the classic invisible man creature and wasted no time in running it down and swinging his bat above its waist—where the “man” part of the invisible man would be. That was strike one.

“Ouch!” Mark yelped as the pants kicked him in the shins. That wasn’t funny at all. He swung downward this time, toward the jeans. They suddenly jerked away, as if caught in a gust of wind. Strike two. They stood back up a few feet away. Mark was getting impatient. “Stop that!”

He charged the pants again, and they began to run away. For an article of clothing without a physical body, they were pretty fast. However without hands the pants couldn’t open doors, and the jeans were backed into a corner against just such a door. “I’ve got you now,” Mark said, but just as he was about to swing again, the pants slipped under the door. The boy sighed, opened the door, and walked through.

The pants were nowhere to be seen. But, in their place, stood Todd Halspur.

Chapter 14

Todd seemed taller than Mark remembered him. He wore sunglasses that hid his eyes, but the smirk on his face rang loud and clear. He'd been looking forward to revenge for what happened back home. Todd readied the red electric guitar he was carrying and played a power chord. It rang out through the room, but rather than trailing off it got louder and louder. Mark struggled to remain standing as it reverberated around him. He knew this trick, and he armed himself with a baseball bat to recite as soon as the chord died down.

As soon as the sound ceased, Mark fired off his tidbit. "Connie Mack has more career victories than any manager in history!"

"And?" said Todd, casual defiance in his voice. It hadn't worked! There was no interference, Todd had ears, and he'd clearly heard Mark—but he wasn't fazed at all by the truth. Had the evil monsters recruited Todd because he was immune to Mark's strategy? "Baseball's for losers."

Mark backed into the door and tried to turn the handle, but the handle had disappeared entirely. He had no way to open the door. He was trapped in the room with Todd, who was getting closer.

"I don't want to fight you, Todd," Mark said. "You don't understand what the evil monsters are like."

"You're just afraid." Todd prepared to play another power chord. "Nowhere to run this time, Short Stop."

Mark covered his ears, but the blast from the guitar knocked him against the wall, hard. The sound rolled over him in waves, and he was getting a headache so bad he couldn't think straight. But Todd was right—Mark *did* want to run away. Just like he wished he could outrun Todd and his cronies outside the game store every day after school. How he wished so badly for an alternate route home. It would be easier to just avoid the bullies altogether, rather than coming up with a way to stop them.

In fact, there were a lot of things Mark ran away from given half a chance. He never stayed overnight when his friends had slumber parties. He hated taking tests so much that it wasn't uncommon for him to develop a stomach ache the morning of a big exam. But he couldn't run forever. He'd even run from Bert—which was why he was all alone right now, face to face with his worst enemy in the whole world.

He had to stop running, here and now, and not just because the door was locked. If he couldn't stop a human bully, what chance would he stand against the Dark World Master? Bert was depending on *him*, not the other way around. But Mark wasn't sure how to actually go about defeating Todd Halspur.

There had to be a clue. Mark wished he could concentrate, but the guitar playing was throwing him off. That was no ordinary instrument. Mark had an idea.

"You're right," he said. "I can't keep running away. But I do have one question—why didn't the trivia bother you?"

Todd laughed. "Cause I don't care about baseball, kid."

"Interesting." Mark had him. He choked up on the bat and prepared a swing. "It makes sense—Todd Halspur hates baseball. Everyone knows that." Todd, unsure where this was going, relaxed his strumming and studied Mark. "But Todd Halspur also dropped out of band because he can't play an instrument." One of the strings on his electric guitar broke with a twang. Mark grinned. "Which means you're *not* Todd Halspur!"

The monster impersonating Todd stumbled backward.

Mark felt a swell of pride. He wished Bert was there to see him; Bert, and his parents, and all the kids in his class. He felt unstoppable. "And if you're not Todd, then baseball trivia *will* upset you, and have I got a good one..." Mark began his swing, so the truth and the bat would hit not-Todd at the same time. "The National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum was created in 1935, to celebrate baseball's 100 year anniversary!"

POW!

After a brief wail of microphone interference, the Todd Halspur impersonator was no more.

Chapter 15

With his arch nemesis out of the picture, Mark had to face the fact that his best friend was, too. He sat down, put his head in his hands, and sighed. There was no point in running around willy-nilly through the mansion. He'd just get even more lost than he already was. He could almost picture his mom, lecturing him before they went into the stadium for a ballgame.

"Now if you get lost, stay put!" she'd said. "If you get scared and charge off, we'll never find you!"

Mark had long since stopped being scared of the creatures of Monster Planet, but he certainly didn't like the thought of being lost on a strange planet, out in the middle of nowhere. He wondered what his mom was up to. His dad, too. Was that what the Todd impersonator meant, about Mark not running away forever?

He really didn't like the idea of the monsters—especially the Dark World Master himself—being able to look into his mind like that. He wondered if he could use that to his advantage, just like the monsters did—think something tricky to throw them off the scent. Seemed like a lot of trouble to go to though. Mark was a pretty honest kid, and he never understood why some people built up complicated lies instead of just coming clean.

He really hoped to see Bert again, because he wanted to apologize. He knew the Gargoyle hadn't meant anything by his comments; Bert had no idea how human families worked. He'd only brought Mark here to help save his people and then Mark had to go and yell at him. What he wouldn't give to hear Bert's voice again.

Suddenly, he did! Somewhere off in the distance, in another room, Bert was calling for Mark.

"Bert!" he shouted back. "Bert, I'm in here!"

Mark shouted several more times, but it didn't seem to do any good. If anything, Bert's voice was getting further away. Mark knew he

shouldn't leave the room, but how was he going to get Bert's attention? Neither had any idea how large this mansion was, or how many doors led to how many different rooms. Still, Mark had an idea so crazy it just might work. He walked to the nearest door and flung it open, revealing a room with hideous green shag carpeting.

Ignoring the décor, Mark shouted for Bert. He shut the door, waited a moment, and opened it again. Eureka! Instead of shag carpeting, there was an aquarium filled with miniature versions of the skeleton fish from outside. "Bert!" he said again into this new room. "Bert, it's me!"

"Mark?" Still faint, but Bert had definitely heard him that time.

The boy kept it up, shouting into a dozen more rooms until finally he opened the door and saw a familiar face—all seven feet of purple Gargoyle.

"Bert!"

"Thank goodness," he said, grabbing Mark in a strong embrace. "I was quite worried for your safety."

"Thanks buddy," Mark patted him on the back. "I was okay though, it's not that scary in here."

Bert seemed impressed, and Mark was starting to feel like the hero he was purported to be. "Really? The Mansion of Madness is quite famous. Few have ever escaped its maniacal maze." Bert felt along the wall, looking for clues. "Some have wandered its halls so long, they've forgotten they even exist. They vanish completely, leaving behind a mere memory of themselves."

Mark felt a little less brave, thinking of that eerie pair of pants he'd encountered. He gulped, hopefully not too loudly. "Do you know the way out?"

"Oh, we aren't going out." Bert smiled and pressed his talon into a spot on the wall, revealing a sliding panel in the wall that happily opened. "Deep in the maze is a tower, which leads directly to the Dark World Master."

Mark followed Bert into a strange, narrow corridor. It seems he'd found the right passage; Todd must have been guarding the pathway to the tower. Those pants thought they were setting a trap, but they actually led Mark exactly where he needed to go. Maybe he was outthinking the Dark World Master, after all. "But you do know the way to the tower?" Mark asked, just to be sure.

"Not exactly, but I know the signs when I see them." That sounded like as good an assurance as Mark was going to get.

GAME HINT

Bert can not only breathe fire, he can also fly. Switch to Bert whenever possible for an easier time.

Chapter 16

The tower, it turned out, wasn't built of huge stones or even small red bricks. It was instead made of a strange soft, carpeted material that made squishing sounds. Mark was curious, but not enough to get down and examine what it might actually be. He likened it to walking around inside of some strange undersea creature. He also threw out any assumptions about architecture, as the tower rose above them for what seemed like miles, but he knew he'd seen no such thing from outside the mansion.

Rather than a staircase, they had to travel up the tower by leaping from platform to platform—each made from the same weird sea carpet. Mark got the feeling that the evil monsters had had enough of the “themed” areas, and were just trying to create obstacles any way they could.

As they climbed they faced many new monsters: flying centipedes, armored warriors, ghosts, and weird creatures with elephant faces. It was like a twisted funhouse of horror, but Mark had no shortage of baseball facts to shout as he attacked with his bat, sending the monsters plummeting to the floor of the tower, which grew further and further away.

Mark squared off against a weird wooden robot. It clicked and snapped like a tree in the breeze where a normal robot would beep. The boy was distracted by such thoughts when the creature hurled a spear directly at his face. Mark dodged sideways, but as he did so he noticed there was no longer anything to support him, and he began to fall straight down.

As he fell, Mark wondered what it would feel like to hit the bottom. Would the carpet soften his fall? If it did, would he survive? Would the carpet's strange, tiny tentacles slowly devour him? Or would they tickle him to death? He watched the floors of the tower speed by, rushing upward. Creatures he'd defeated watched him and shook their fists (or hooks, or suckers).

He was watching a particularly hideous scorpion with feelers that resembled a beard. He remembered fighting it on the way up, feeling sorry for it more than wanting to defeat it. It was watching him fall quite happily when its expression suddenly changed.

At the same time, Mark felt his arms jerk upward and his body cease falling. He looked up and saw Bert.

“Don’t scare me like that,” said the Gargoyle. “Or at least announce when you’re going to fall to your doom.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Mark said, glad Bert had noticed. They flew on Bert’s enormous leathery wings, back up to where they left off. Not far from there was a door—this one fancier and more impressive than any they’d come across yet. “Let me guess,” Mark said, pointing at the door. “In there?”

Bert nodded, and together they entered. But there was nothing in the room. Not one piece of furniture, or even a floor. No monsters either. As Mark’s eyes adjusted, he realized the room wasn’t exactly empty, it was simply dark—pitch dark.

Two lights pierced the darkness several yards away. They were very close together, and they rose into the air high above Mark’s position. They flared to life and illuminated a bit more, like the bleached skull that held them, inside the hood of a cloak. The monster’s cloak stretched to the floor, and hid the back side of what Mark would describe as an empty body; all bones, guts, and parasites.

The jawbone of the skull opened up and chattered a raspy laugh. It was then that Mark noticed the other important feature of the room: the towering monster held an enormous scythe, its blade notched in several places.

“Hello little boy,” rattled the monster. As it spoke, the bugs and things inside its cloak wriggled, as if they were its vocal chords. “I’m the Grim Reaper, nice to meet you.”

Instinct took over and Mark swung his bat, nailing it on the chin. Its skull spun around, rotating on its neck and coming back to rest in its proper position.

“That wasn’t nice at all,” said the Reaper, before releasing the scariest, spine-chillingest laugh Mark had ever heard. He thought his skin was going to crawl right off his body and hide in a hole somewhere. Mark’s nerves were shattered, and he couldn’t do anything but shiver in place. He felt Bert’s calming hand on his shoulder.

“It will be all right,” said Bert. Mark nodded and decided to leave this one to his friend. Surely flaming Gargoyle breath would knock the Reaper down a peg. Bert turned to the tall terror. “What’s the current situation?”

It didn’t sound like a very effective battle cry to Mark.

The Reaper sat down, hugging his knees. He’d rested his scythe against a nearby wall, and the strange carpet tentacles held onto it. When he spoke to Bert he sounded more personable, but his voice retained its shrill rasp. Mark didn’t like that voice much at all.

“Most of the evil monsters were dispatched to stop the two of you,” said the Grim Reaper. It casually pointed a bony thumb over its shoulder toward Mark. “I assume that’s the champion from Earth?”

“Yes,” Bert said with some measure of pride. “I’m certain he’ll be able to defeat the Dark World Master.”

“Well, be careful. Even though his troops are away, he’s very dangerous.” Mark saw a vague shiver travel through the Reaper. This Master must be serious business if Death is afraid of him. “He knows you’re coming.”

“We know. Mark discovered that some time ago.” If Bert was afraid, Mark couldn’t tell. He still wasn’t quite sure why the Gargoyle needed his help, but he wasn’t going to let him down. Not this time.

Bert moved toward a gigantic door on the far wall and Mark trotted behind him. A portal surged just on the other side, spewing strange smoke along the floor of the room.

“Hey Bert,” the Reaper said, a sing-song quality in his tone. “I kept that door open for ya’, but I didn’t expect to do it for free.”

Bert smiled and reached into his pack. He produced a chicken finger—far less fresh than it had been several hours ago. It looked soggy, to be honest, and its color was off. But Mark could tell that this didn’t bother the Reaper. Bert tossed the snack right into the creature’s mouth and turned to leave.

As they vanished inside the portal, Mark could hear that freaky voice calling after them. “Stick with Bert, kid. He’s one of the good ones!”

Chapter 17

As Mark could have guessed after traveling miles upward in that tower, they now stood amongst the clouds, stars twinkling all around them. However there was much more to it than that. All around them were temples made of marble and gold. Harp music could be heard, strummed by invisible hands. There was a peace in the air, and the stars were below them—not just in the skies above.

Mark rubbed his eyes, just to be sure. Everything was still there. He even noticed a fountain made of rainbows he'd somehow missed upon first inspection.

"What is it?" Bert asked. "What does it look like to you?"

Mark searched for the words, but for a moment just moved his mouth, it was so unbelievable. "It looks like Heaven."

Bert looked around. It was obvious that the heavenly symbols meant nothing to him. "Is Heaven somewhere from Earth?"

"No, it's..." He tried to think of the best way to explain it. "It's where good people go when they die."

"Ha!" Bert laughed at the scene around them. "You think their final trick would be less obvious, for this is quite the opposite of Heaven. We're in the inner sanctum of the Dark World Master himself."

As if on cue, a witch swooped down from behind a nearby cloud, tossing hexes at the pair while riding a broom. Several "stars" began moving, and dove dangerously close to Mark. He knocked one with his bat into the witch, who fell from her broom.

"Maybe he's trying to send a message?" Mark said.

"Don't let it get to you." Bert shot fire at a second witch, who wisely zoomed off. "Think of how many of his evil monsters you've already defeated."

It was true. After fighting weird mermen, skeletons, ghosts, goblins, and even Todd Halspur, Mark shouldn't have been afraid of anything less than the Dark World Master. It didn't matter what form they took—these were all just low-level monsters. As the Grim Reaper said, all the worst baddies had already been overcome on the way here.

He started to wonder if the Dark World Master was really all he was cracked up to be. Maybe for Mark alone, but Mark and Bert made an unstoppable team. He wondered what the Dark World Master looked like. Was it really as bad as it had looked in his dream? Maybe he was a creepy little gremlin instead. The image made Mark laugh.

The more he thought about it, the more he was certain there was nothing to worry about. He challenged the Dark World Master in his own mind. Better run, thought Mark. We won't be happy when we find you.

He fixated so much on these thoughts that he forgot where he was. In fact, the world around him suddenly vanished. It just blinked out to darkness, as if someone had snapped and made it disappear like a cheap stage magician. Mark bumped into something hard—probably a marble column—and realized the world was still there exactly as before; he just couldn't see it.

"I'm blind," Mark said. Or Mark tried to say before realizing he couldn't hear himself. Had he lost his hearing, or his ability to speak? He fell down and felt around on the ground, but the clouds weren't solid, so his hands passed through nothing. That is, assuming the clouds were still there. Mark had no way to know for sure. He felt like he was floating—falling through a big empty sky, complete blackness spread as far as Mark could perceive.

Then the darkness opened its eyes, and Mark saw exactly what the Dark World Master looked like.

Chapter 18

The reality of the Dark World Master was much, much worse than it had appeared in Mark's dream. An enormous, twisted nose protruded from his face like a gross dagger. Below its nose gaped a cavernous mouth, lined with cruel razor-sharp teeth. The teeth weren't evenly arranged like the crafted smiles in family photos; they were rammed randomly into many rows, like a shark's.

But what stood out most, what grabbed Mark's attention and wouldn't let go, were the Master's huge, staring eyes. Each one was twice as big as Mark and placed inside wide-open sockets where he could see muscles and veins pulsing and pumping. The eyes both stared directly into Mark's. While he was glad he wasn't actually blind, the boy wasn't sure this was any better.

The Dark World Master's gaze was so powerful that Mark felt as though thousands of eyes were fixed on him from every direction. He imagined even the walls had eyes—all staring, ceaselessly, into his mind.

Mark opened his mouth to shout a baseball fact he'd been saving just for this occasion, but the booming voice of the Dark World Master interrupted him. "Save your breath," it commanded. It was the type of voice you couldn't ignore. It surrounded Mark and pressed in on him. It felt a lot like the shadows that had blinded Mark, but worse. He preferred it when he couldn't see anything. But Mark remembered he was a hero, and that Bert needed him to do this—Bert wouldn't have brought Mark here just to lose now.

But if trivia wouldn't work, it was the same situation as the Todd impersonator. He had to weaken it somehow. "Bert said you were weak to truth!" Mark shouted. His voice sounded tiny and weak compared to the Dark World Master.

The large, tooth-filled mouth twisted into a grin. "Yes, exactly. I'm terrified of it. Truth ruins me, it reduces me to a pile of mush." His face changed in a heartbeat, becoming a terrifying scowl. "But your pitiful trivia is not truth! It's facts! It means nothing to you and even less to me."

“Of course it means something,” Mark said defensively. “I love baseball!”

It had no effect, and Mark felt like he’d had this same conversation before. “You love playing baseball. But the trivia is just an escape. Something you do to forget about the real problems in your life. Like bullying.”

Of course! This had all happened in the dream Mark had after the zombie dance, and he didn’t feel particularly threatened by that jab this time. He’d already defeated Todd in real life *and* on Monster Planet. And he was currently squaring off against something far more powerful than a school yard bully.

“Or...” the Dark World Master paused. The words came slow, as if he wanted Mark to concentrate on every syllable. “Your parents.”

Now it was Mark’s turn to be weakened by the truth. It slapped him across the face, and he could feel himself falling again, falling into endless darkness. His parents’ arguments rang in his ears, punctuated by slamming doors and loud footsteps on the stairs. Shouting and crying filled his mind.

He thought about all of the pictures of them on the mantle—happy pictures with lots of smiling and kissing. They were pictures from before he was born. Mark felt a familiar heaviness pulling at his stomach. Maybe all the arguing was his fault. Tears burned at his eyes. He tried to hold them back, but they came through anyway.

“Bwa ha ha ha!” Wherever Mark was, it shook like an earthquake. “Go ahead, cry! You came all this way only to fail. You’ve disappointed your friend Bert, and the Monster Princess herself. You’ve disappointed them, just like you did your parents.” Then the Dark World Master added, “I would cry too.”

Mark knew he was right. This monster could peer into his mind and see everything. Mark huddled in a tiny ball, darkness swirling around him, and prepared to be eaten.

Chapter 19

Mark's thoughts spiraled out of control. He'd managed to not think about his home life for most of this adventure, but now that the Dark World Master had brought it up, Mark couldn't escape. It was like a mental, intergalactic game of stop-hitting-yourself. But the more he thought about it, the more other memories slipped through all the ones of fighting and yelling. He remembered a lot of quieter memories, too.

Mark remembered his mother tucking him into bed at night, or his dad's laugh when he overheard a funny joke in one of Mark's cartoons. His mother's cheering at his baseball games, and all the games his dad had taken him to see in the big stadium. He remembered the whole family sitting on his bed, reading a story out of a big book.

"You're wrong!" Mark struggled to his feet, knees wobbling, and attempted to dry his sticky eyes.

"Am I? Prove it." The grotesque face leaned in closer and Mark felt its hot, disgusting breath. "What's this big truth that makes your human life worth anything? What makes all the bullying and arguing disappear?"

Mark focused on his happy memories, and the one thing they all had in common. He hoped this would work; the monster's mouth was open wide and, he was pretty sure, ready to eat him, but he couldn't let Bert and the rest of Monster Planet down. He couldn't disappoint his parents, because...

"My parents love me!" Mark shouted. "Very much!"

The world jerked. Mark heard something big shattering far away. The Dark World Master howled in pain. Its enormous eyes wanted to shut but couldn't; the muscles behind them were pulsing and shaking with the effort. Gradually the shadows lifted, and reality broke through the haze. Bert was still standing next to Mark, and the boy collapsed against him.

“What’s wrong?” Bert smacked away a weird tentacle monster and knelt to Mark’s level.

Mark tried to focus, but the shifting in and out of his mind left him disoriented. “Dark...World...Master...”

“Is he here!?” Bert spun, flames building in his throat.

“My mind,” he stammered. “Fought him inside.”

“That explains it.” Bert lifted Mark into his arms and the boy noticed that the entire sector was heaving and shaking. The palaces were crumbling, columns toppling off the clouds and falling far down below. “There!”

With a start, Bert was flying through the air at top speed, rushing toward the Dark World Master, who had appeared in the sky not far off. His face hung on nothing and he was in pain, just as disoriented as Mark, who clung to Bert’s chest. Bert didn’t know what had happened, but it seemed like Mark had done something, though it was clear not without some cost. Bert vowed to make the Dark World Master pay in kind.

The Gargoyle unleashed a huge blast of fire breath as soon as he came within range. It was aimed at the Dark World Master’s eyes, and they sizzled and bubbled under the assault. It let out a wail of pain.

“Curse you!” shouted the lord of evil. “And that little human, too!” Bert did not let up, repeating the attack for as long as his bellows would hold out. The sector had crumbled, leaving only the Dark World Master, Bert, and Mark to battle it out.

As the Master weakened, breathing in haggard gasps, Bert leaned in to see if Mark was okay. Luckily, Mark was mostly recovered. “Are you ready to be a hero?” asked Bert.

“Why not?” Mark said, in his best casual action hero impression, gripping his bat.

Bert circled back around the Dark World Master, pausing right in front of its enormous face. Bert took Mark in one hand, wound up like a pitcher, and launched the boy toward their foe.

Flying through the air, Mark pulled his bat back for the most important home run of his life, and swung it forward with all the power he could muster—striking the Dark World Master right in his stupid nose.

It was the perfect grand slam. Mark could practically hear the crowd going wild. The giant, evil face exploded into a million pieces that rained down like tiny sparkling stars. Mark watched the spectacle as he fell

faster and faster through the air. He closed his eyes, hoping that Bert would catch him before he hit the ground, but he wasn't afraid.

He'd done it! He was a hero!

Mark let his mind drift off again. The wind rushed past his ears, drowning out all other sound.

And then, suddenly, he stopped.

Chapter 20

“Mark? Mark honey!”

Mark sat up in bed. His heart was racing; what a dream he must have had. He looked around and everything was exactly as he’d left it; his bat propped in the corner, his mitt, and there on the floor was his ball. He must have fallen asleep and let go of it. “I’m in my room, Mom!”

A few moments later, Mark’s door opened and his mom and dad peeked in. “Hey buddy,” said his dad. “Did you fall asleep?”

“Guess so,” he laughed. He was just happy to see his parents—
together, even.

They shared a big family hug before Mark’s mom and dad sat down on the bed too. “Sorry we’re late,” said his mom. She could tell it hadn’t been easy for Mark, walking home in the rain and everything. “We’d gone shopping for dinner and traffic was just awful! It’s so late I don’t even feel like cooking.”

“Meaning you better change outta that uniform,” his dad said. “We’re going for pizza!”

“Really!?” Mark jumped down and ran to his dresser, throwing together a quick outfit. “All of us?”

“Of course!” His dad was laughing in a way Mark hadn’t heard for months. “My big project at work finally wrapped, so I have time to spend with you two again!”

Mark’s parents left him to change, which he did in moments before sprinting down stairs to a fun family meal.

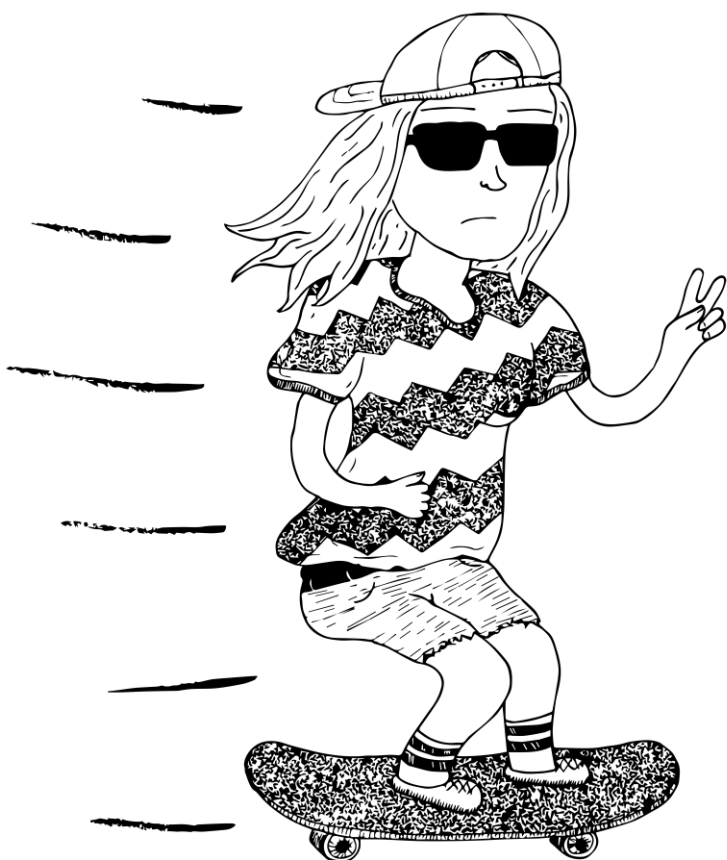
They piled into the family car with more jokes and laughter, and Mark forgot why he was ever worried in the first place. As they pulled out of the driveway, something was stirring in Mark’s room, unknown to the happy family.

A taloned claw shot out from under Mark’s bed, and Bert emerged with a jolt. He was in a hurry.

“Mark!” Bert shouted. “I was wrong! The Princess has opened Pandora’s Box, and the very fabric of reality hangs in the balance!” He tossed the bed aside and stood, looking about the room.

Mark was nowhere to be found. Bert stood alone, with a handful of toys, a dresser, and some posters. And, of course, an upturned bed, which Bert clumsily returned to its proper place. He sat down on the colorful sheets, and the mattress sagged much more than usual under his weight.

“I guess I’ll wait here.”



CALIFORNIA GAMES

by Matthew McKinley

Chapter 1

Enter Corey

All the leaves were brown, and the sky was grey. That was the first sign that Corey was nowhere near his sunny Southern California home. He was standing at the top of a hill with a deep and dark forest all around him. Corey shivered, and not just because of the cold; as hard as he tried, he could not remember how he had gotten there!

Giant gusts of wind rattled the trees and blew Corey's blonde hair around. He looked down again and saw something he had missed before: a plastic disk that was on the ground. Corey picked it up. It was bright pink, with neon yellow lettering on it that spelled out BELIEVE. He was not sure what that meant.

Suddenly Corey heard a cry. He looked to the bottom of the hill and saw his best friend Sly Winkle waving his arms. Sly was wearing the silly old hat his grandpa gave him, and also the same oversized tie-dye t-shirt he always wore. He seemed to want the disk, so Corey threw it at him. It flew a little ways, but then got sucked up into the air. It was only then that Corey noticed the tornado coming right for them!

He yelled at Sly to turn around and run away, but it was so windy that he couldn't hear him. Soon enough Sly's hat flew off into the whirling tornado, causing Sly to turn around, but by then it was too late. He got sucked in before Corey could even react.

There was no time to grieve or even think, as all around him trees were being uprooted from the ground and pulled into the fierce twister. Corey looked for something to hold on to and found a huge rock half buried in the ground that he could just barely wrap his arms around. As the tornado blew wildly, Corey could just make out a thin and raspy voice that seemed to come from all around him.

"Corey! You have a great power that is waiting to be unleashed. When the time of legend arrives, the power will be yours!"

Corey looked around, but saw no one. He felt scared and also a

little annoyed. Who was talking to him? And what power were they talking about?

“Where are you? What are you talking about? I don’t have any powers, I’m just a kid!”

“You must use your power to help your friends! All will be revealed in time. For now, you must believe in yourself. It is the only way!”

Before Corey could reply, he looked down and saw that the rock he was holding on to had turned into an old man’s face! The old man whispered “believe,” and Corey was so startled that he shouted and let go of the rock. Tumbling backwards into the tornado, Corey heard the word “believe” echoing in his ears before the whole world turned black.

* * *

click “I’d be safe and warm... if I was in LA...”

Corey was still shaking the last traces of the odd dream from his head as he reached for the clock radio on his nightstand. But before he could even turn the thing off, Corey heard a holler and a tremendous crash from the hallway. He threw on some jeans and smacked the clock before dashing out the door.

His eyes first fell on an old derby hat, dented and still rolling to a stop. His gaze traveled quickly up the hall and, though he was relieved to find his best friend Sly was not in the same sort of shape, he did have a few questions about the bike Sly was working to extract himself from. His friend noticed the curious look and sheepishly scampered to his feet.

“I wanted to show you my new bike. It’s a Gruffy Cilantro 620, with stripes and everything! Your front door was unlocked and the hallway looked too tempting.”

“Tell me, Sly, is it not traditional to knock on the planet your people come from?”

Sly shrugged. “I rang my bell a few times.” He squeezed the handle bar and the shiny new bike chirped joyfully.

“Sly, can I ask you a weird question?”

“Have you *met* me?”

“Have you ever seen a tornado? I mean in real life?”

Sly considered for a moment. “I saw some pretty wicked storms staying with my aunt last summer in Florida, but nothing like a tornado. Why?”

“It’s nothing. I just had the craziest dream. Anyway, it’s a nice ride but try to take it down a notch. My mom will skin me alive if you break anything.”

As if on cue, Uncle Z burst through the door and walked right into the newly inconvenient conveyance where it lay on the floor. He skidded backwards before slamming into the wall, knocking down a family photo and cracking its frame. Dazed, he rubbed his eyes.

“Sweet ride, Sly. That a Cilantro 400?”

“As if! It’s a 620, limited edition!”

Uncle Z’s full name was Zukie Philo, a full-time inventor and part-time garbage man who had occupied their basement apartment for as long as Corey could remember. Zukie was young at heart and an inspired mischief maker. The contrast between him and Corey’s dad couldn’t have been greater: Uncle Z was a big, boisterous belly laugh; Dad was a dry chuckle followed by an extended rattle of newspaper. Corey wasn’t really even sure that Z was his uncle: when asked, his mother would mutter something about the width of his father’s gene pool with a far-off smirk on her face. His dad, who was never really much for chatting anyway, declined to get into specifics.

Despite his oddball sense of humor and occasional bout of clowning around, Corey generally took after his father; he was quiet and bookish, but friendly enough in a reserved sort of way. Z took this general shyness as a personal insult and was constantly trying to get him to “open up,” whatever that meant. It mostly seemed to involve Uncle Z wanting to do stuff he was way too old for, or talking Corey up to a group of cute girls, to Corey’s total embarrassment. If Z ever noticed the looks his nephew gave him, he never let on, insisting that it was his job as “the fun uncle” to liven up both of their worlds. And speaking of..

“Well I gotta admit, Sly, these *are* some dope wheels...but wait’ll you get a load of what I found for the C-monster!”

At this, Uncle Z swung wide the door he had entered from to reveal a well-loved BMX bike. Unlike some of Z’s more recent finds, the thing seemed more or less intact. Pedals, wheels, handlebars, the works. There was just one thing:

“It’s pink! There’s a basket...and there’s flowers on the basket!”

“Chill, little man, I can fix it up no problem. Can you believe someone would throw this away, just because it was missing both wheels? It’s a good thing I had a few extras down in the shop!” He lifted the rear of the bike and gave the wheel a few wobbly rotations. “Good as new! All set for the big race.”

Big...wha...*oh no!* How could he forget? Today was the day of the big qualifying BMX race at Sheep Hills. The first five kids to finish 3 laps would get a chance to compete in the California Games, a legendary tournament held every two years, where high schoolers from all over the state competed to see who was the raddest at all kinds of extreme sports. The winner got a pizza party with a mystery celebrity guest for their whole school, and, more importantly, bragging rights to last a life time. Not that Corey had any chance at winning; he was so far from extreme that he actually kinda enjoyed doing his math homework.

Still, everyone from school was gonna be at Sheep Hills and Z had somehow convinced Corey to sign up, despite his old bike getting thrashed to pieces by a street cleaner last year. Uncle Z made Corey promise that if he found him a working bike, Corey would at least show up, and it looked like Z had pulled through.

Corey was nervously considering the implications of this when his mom called from the kitchen:

“Peanut butter and banana for lunch! Leaving in half an hour!”

“Yikes, half an hour?! Better get this baby ready for prime time!” Uncle Z hustled off with the bike in tow.

“See you at the Hills, Corey! I hope you like the taste of dust!” Sly rode through the living room and out the front door, with Corey’s mother hollering in his wake.

Suddenly alone, if just for a moment, Corey fell back on his bed and tried to psych himself up. He only lived a mile from Sheep Hills; he’d been riding those trails all his life, but this would be on an unfamiliar bike against all sorts of other kids. Would he be able to hack it? Was he really a bad enough dude for this?

Chapter 2

BMX

Lined up atop a mountain of dry-packed mud with two dozen other young hopefuls, scanning a course littered with hazards man-made and otherwise, Corey had his answer: No. There was no way he was a bad enough dude for this.

But it was too late to back out now. He had less than a minute until the race started, barely enough time to size up his competition and make some sort of plea to the buff, manly and presumably mohawked gods of extreme sport. To his left was Sly, frantically trying to work out which of 48 distinct gear settings would work best out of the gate. On his right he had somehow lucked out and gotten placed next to Tiffani Smith, an athletic girl in his grade who played pretty much every sport but could still totally rock a dress at the spring formal.

Tiffani was one of those girls who seemed about a dozen years more mature than any boy at school, and seeing her in the hallway always turned Corey's tongue to sandpaper and his feet to paperweights. Spotting him out of the corner of her eye, Tiffani gave Corey the same friendly smile she always did, and for the first time in his life he had to try very hard not to topple off a completely stationary bike.

As if that wasn't bad enough, immediately on *her* right was Jake Sommers, who had recently relocated from ritzy La Jolla to Corey's, Tiffani's and Sly's school. Jake was decked out in a pile of barely used gear inherited from his older brother Gavin, who was basically pro, and looked suitably smug on his insanely expensive Dustmaster 6000. He wore sunglasses all the time, even inside, and was always cracking up girls with jokes that weren't even funny. Corey had heard he even knew how to play guitar.

How can I compete with that? Corey thought, staring glumly down at his ride.

Uncle Z had spray-painted the whole thing silver, including the

basket and flowers he hadn't actually been able to remove, and christened it the "Zoomin' Zephyr." Even the name was lame.

But a free bike was a free bike, and now that he saw who he was up against, Corey desperately wanted to place, if only to impress Tiffani and show Jake that just because a kid was nerdy and poor didn't mean he can't ride.

"WELLLLLL-COME! TO! THE! CALIFORNIA GAMMMEEEESSSS OrangeCountyBMXqualifyingEvent," the announcer boomed. "ONLY FIVE OF THESE CONTENDERS WILL MOVE ON TO THE NEXT EVENT! WHO WILL PROVE THEMSELVES RAD ENOUGH TO COMPETE AGAINST ALL OF CALIFORNIA? WHO IS READY TO SHOW WE REALLY ARE THE COAST WITH THE MOST? WHO IS READY TO GET BODACIOUS ON ALL SORTS OF GNARLY TRACK? RACERS, PUT ON YOUR PADS AND HELMETS!"

While his competitors strapped in with distant stares, concentrating on the race ahead, Corey stole one last look at Sly, who cranked his gearshift all the way down and gave him a thumbs up. He had replaced his beat-up old hat with a helmet but otherwise looked as unprepared for this race as he was for most things. Corey gave a weak grin and double-checked his pads.

"ON YOUR MARK! GET SET! GOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

As the other racers rocketed ahead, Corey pumped slowly at the pedals, trying to gain momentum on the unfamiliar ride. He wished he had some time to practice but his mood improved after cresting the first hill and feeling the wind in his face. Corey heard an ominous CHUNK CHUNK and looked back briefly to see Sly wobbling wildly and trying his best not to recreate the scene in the hallway this morning.

Upon turning back around, Corey had just enough time to see the spare tire in his path before colliding and sailing off the Zephyr and into the dirt.

Blinking through a cloud of dust, he could just make out Sly pull ahead with a cackle that was trying way too hard to sound friendly.

"Bummer! Who leaves a tire in the middle of a bike course, anyway?!" Sly crowed. "I swear, this place is really going *downhill*!"

Corey had some choice words of his own to share, but Sly was already gone. As he pulled himself to his feet, he noticed a glint in the sand and pulled out a strange piece of rock, thin and round with a small hole in the center, like a flattened stone donut. Without really thinking about it, Corey stuck the small disk in his pocket. He'd have more time to

examine it later, and at the very least Uncle Z might want to add such a strange stone to his ever expanding collection of—well, pretty much everything.

But there was no time for that now; Corey was in absolute last place.

Well, he thought, *I guess there's nowhere to go but up*. He climbed aboard his silver steed and began recklessly barreling ahead to make up for lost time.

And somehow, the gods of extreme sport did smile upon him. He rocketed through the first two laps, leaving a dozen other kids gaping in the dust at his silvery, be-flowered phantom as it overtook them. Even more impressive, Corey managed to dodge three more tires, a downed tree, a terrified raccoon and an entire patio set dumped unceremoniously in the middle of the course.

He was currently pedaling in third place, higher than he'd placed in anything since shoe toss in fourth grade field day.

Ahead of him were Tiffani and Jake, neck and neck just as perennial winners like themselves are always destined to be. Jake's sunglasses were almost as blinding as his easy grin, and equally aggravating.

Two riders back, Sly was riding a respectable fifth, though he had given Corey an unbelievably sour look as he passed. In between was a fierce and dark-haired girl Corey didn't recognize.

Focus, he thought. *Just one more lap. You can do this!* As if on cue, Uncle Z popped up on the sidelines frantically waving a peanut butter sandwich in the air.

"Give 'em hell, C-monster!"

Corey maniacally grinned right back, exhilarated at the prospect of finally succeeding at something sports-related, and was too busy grinning to notice the rock that had stealthily sprung up in his path.

Just before hitting the ground, Corey caught a glimpse of the rock that felled him: It was the same old man rock from his dream!

Corey could have sworn the rock actually winked at him, and the next thing he knew, he was once more atop his silvery Zephyr and breezing past the finish line.

He peered backward and to his amazement, every rider was behind him! He had beaten them all! Jake, Tiffany, Sly and the raven-haired girl all wore faces of annoyance and resignation, but none seemed

as mystified as Corey now felt. Either all were familiar with the basic principles of teleportation, or there was something very weird going on.

Corey had no time to ponder this.

The crowd erupted in applause and the loudspeaker boomed to life: “WOWWHATANUPSET! ...errrrCOREY PHILLIPS COMES FROM BEHIND FOR THE WIN! THESE KIDS ARE GOING TOOOOO...THE CALIFORNIA GAMES!!!”

* * *

Later that night, after a celebratory trip to Pizza Hut, Corey escaped to his room and tried to process the events of the day.

Sly gave a begrudging high-five and a “looks like we’re in this together, buddy” look before pulling his hat down over his tangled mop of hair.

The dark-haired girl slapped him a little too hard on the back before introducing herself as Epyx. “You know, like the *Odyssey*!” Corey was still too shell-shocked from the race and subsequent events to realize how strange it was for a teenage girl in So Cal to reference an ancient Greek text, so he just nodded and gave a weak “of course.”

Tiffani gave him a more enthusiastic high-five than Sly had. “I didn’t know you could ride like that! I’m amazed we all made it past the patio set alive. See you next week!” It was more than she had ever spoken to him previously. As his knees turned to jelly, he kind of wished he had a patio chair to crumple into.

Even Jake gave what may have been half a nod from afar, though he was still too cool a dude to approach, or even to remove his signature shades.

The strangest part was that none of them had even noticed that Corey went from a crumpled loser on the ground to the head of the pack in less than the blink of an eye. With hindsight, Corey wasn’t even sure he believed it himself.

Maybe the whole situation was just his imagination, a hallucination brought on by his lack of a decent breakfast before the big race.

But why did he see the same rock from his dream? The question nagged at him like a blinking INSERT COIN at the arcade after he had just used his last quarter.

Corey heard a knock at his door, accompanied by the deep voice of his father. “Can I come in?”

Corey opened the door and returned to bed while his dad sat down in the desk chair.

“Heard you won the bike race. Congratulations! Can’t believe I missed it, but you know how I have to work late sometimes...”

“It’s fine, Dad. I mean, we did get pizza out of it.”

They shared an awkward silence. Corey’s father fiddled with a pile of textbooks on the desk.

“Your mother told me the half-pipe event’s next weekend. You gonna practice?”

Corey hadn’t thought that far ahead. He could barely even stand on a skateboard, but his dad wouldn’t know this. After today’s display Corey was pretty sure his father thought of him as some athletic super kid.

“Yeah, dad, I’ll do what I can.”

“Well, just don’t neglect these.” He rapped his knuckles on the text books. “Say, what’s this?”

His father picked up the strange stone disk he had found out on Sheep Hills that afternoon. Corey had totally forgotten about the object and wasn’t even sure how it ended up on the desk in his bedroom.

“Just something I picked up during the race today. It looked kinda interesting, so I thought I’d show it to Uncle Z”.

“If anyone would know anything, it’s your Uncle Zukie.”

Corey thought he saw a flash of recognition in his father’s eyes before he set the rock down on top of the books, but it could have just been exhaustion.

It had been a long, confusing day.

The phone rang in the next room and Corey’s dad looked pained. “I gotta get this, buddy. You have a good night, alright? And I promise I’ll make it out next weekend.”

He was out the door before Corey could reply.

Corey wanted to show the strange rock to Uncle Z, but he was already in bed and could barely keep his eyes open. As he drifted off, his mind ran through a jumble of details from the day: Sly’s old hat, rolling to a stop...a terrified raccoon...peanut butter and banana sandwiches...and an old man’s face, whispering *believe...*

Chapter 3

Half Pipe

It was Saturday once more, and Corey was driving with his mother and Uncle Z down Sunset Boulevard, on their way to the official California Games half pipe in the Hollywood Hills. Corey's dad had something come up at the last minute (of course), so it was just the three of them, though he had plans to meet up with Sly and his other schoolmates at the event.

Corey tried to focus on the competition ahead while his mother grilled him about knee pads and keeping his door locked as they drove through the grungy streets of a neighborhood some showbiz jokester had apparently named Tinseltown.

Earlier that week, Z had loaned him an old skateboard he found abandoned behind a Santa Monica skate shop and refitted with mismatched wheels. It looked even more beat-up than the Zephyr, but it rode smoothly enough. After five days of practice on a makeshift backyard half pipe built by Sly's older brother Radley, Corey emerged with a whole constellation of cuts and bruises.

More importantly, though, not only could he now stay on his board for a decent amount of time, but he was able to drop in on the ramp without immediately wiping out.

He still couldn't do any fancy hand plants or turns, however, and didn't hold much hope for placing high in today's competition.

Still, Uncle Z promised to find him a better board before the event, and indeed had spent most of the nights out bartering with other collectors of "gently used" merchandise. Between his uncle's quest and never-ending practice runs on Radley's ramp, Corey hadn't gotten a chance to quiz his uncle about his find on the BMX trails, never mind the strange events that immediately followed.

Corey had the stone disk in his pocket now, but before he could ask his uncle about it, they arrived at the large grassy field near Griffith

Park that was being used as a makeshift parking lot for the day's event. As his mom pulled into a parking space defined more by its proximity to other cars than any sort of actual markings, Uncle Z leaped excitedly out of the car and popped open the trunk.

"Well, it cost me an aquarium filter, eight pool balls and most of a vacuum cleaner, but I finally found you a board, little dude!"

Uncle Z spun around with an eye-searing slab of blue, red, yellow and neon green. Could it be?

It was. A Vision Tom Groholski Pro Model with extra-wide Tracker trucks attached to a brand new set of Santa Cruz Slime Balls. In other words, it was the perfect skateboard.

For all his bodacious bluster, Uncle Z knew next to nothing about what made a quality piece of extreme sport equipment. Corey marveled at the astronomical odds that had been beaten to bring him this fantastic deck. He thanked his uncle graciously, strapped on his pads and went to check out the half pipe.

The boards around the ramps were plastered with colorful signs advertising products sold by sponsors of the event—Maxx Out X-treme Performance Wear, Santa Cruz Skateboards, Casio Calculator Watches—with the iconic Hollywood letters framed by rolling hills and a blue sky behind.

What was he doing here? Was he really this extreme? The win last week at Sheep Hills seemed to prove as much, but Corey's thumping heart and watery knees suggested otherwise.

Luckily, he had this rad board to help him settle his nerves and focus. He was admiring it again when his friend approached from behind.

"No way! I thought they stopped making those!" Sly's eyebrows were raised approvingly.

"Luckily, I know a guy who only deals in vintage equipment."

Corey scanned the crowd and groaned audibly upon noticing his uncle in a newly bought lime green SKATE OR DIE baseball cap. Well, at least his guy came through when it counted. "You nervous, Sly?"

"Nah. I've been riding Radley's ramp for years. I figured out handplants last summer. I may not take the gold but I won't embarrass myself." He seemed noticeably more relaxed than last weekend. "Sorry about Sheep Hills, dude. I was being a total butthead. What can I say? I get nervous and my evil twin comes out, complete with a bunch of dumb wisecracks."

“Don’t even worry about it.” Corey smirked. “But those jokes were pretty lame.”

“Didn’t seem to faze you. And you still won’t tell me how you blazed all the way to the finish that fast. I swear, it was like you teleported!”

Sly had been needling him about it all week. Corey didn’t want to reveal how true Sly’s assumption really was. “What can I say? I guess when I get nervous, my *faster* twin comes out. That Epyx girl really came out of nowhere too.” As he said it, he saw the girl in question approach out of the corner of his eye. “And speaking of...”

Suddenly, Sly was nowhere to be found. Epyx was strapping on her pads and admiring Corey’s skateboard. “That’s certainly...colorful.”

She brandished her own notched and scratched board. “I’ve been riding this thing for longer than I can remember. Bombing hills all over Long Beach. But this is the first time I’ve been in an actual competition. Hope she holds up!”

Epyx was a fast talker. She noticed the look in Corey’s eyes and cut him short before he could even open his mouth. “I know what you’re gonna ask. It’s what everyone asks. My full name is Emilia Perona-Yvette Xochicale. I get tired just saying it. So I go by Epyx, which is way cooler, right? Makes me feel like I’m on MTV, even though I couldn’t hold a tune if I crammed it in my pocket. Anyways, I gotta motor. Just my luck, I drew first run. Into the breach, eh?”

Wait, he knew that one. Something they were reading in school... “Uhm, Ray Bradbury?”

“Shakespeare, dummy!” she called over her shoulder as she skated away.

Corey was a little stunned by Epyx’s chummy, rapid-fire greeting. Still, it had distracted him from the race for a few minutes, and her gusto did make him feel a little more confident. Sly reappeared to his right and let out what sounded like a very wussy sigh.

“So, she’s pretty cool, right? What’d you two talk about?”

“I wouldn’t really call it talking. I was just trying to stay afloat.”

“I know, it’s great!” Sly adjusted his derby hat. “I feel like I’m on *Jeopardy*. All the other girls at school seem to want to talk about is lip gloss.”

Sly trotted away and Corey scanned the crowd once more for his uncle. He found him bumming a cigarette from a couple punk rockers on the fringes of the crowd. Corey dragged his uncle away.

“Uncle Z, you don’t even smoke!”

Z discreetly flicked the unlit cigarette away. “Hey, don’t tell them that. We were hitting it off. I was gonna go jam with them next week!”

Sigh. “Uncle Z, *you don’t know how to jam.*”

“Well, yeah...but I’ve got plenty of instruments back at the shop!”

Just Corey’s luck. He was probably the only kid at the event who had to keep an eye on his impressionable old uncle to keep him from wandering off. And the half-pipe runs were about to begin!

Luckily, he saw his mom weaving through the crowd, sticking out like a nail at a hammer convention. Still, he was glad she came, both to babysit Uncle Z before he got in too much trouble, and for the moral support. It was more than he could say for his dad, at yet another one of his mysterious “work events.”

Itching to get to the ramp and see some of the action, Corey took the stone disk from his pocket and pressed it into Uncle Z’s hand.

He looked perplexed. Corey tried to explain.

“I found it last week at Sheep Hills and kept it because it looked too perfect to be natural. Maybe it’s some sort of weird arrowhead or something. Anyway, you’re usually the one to talk to about this sort of stuff. What do you make of it?”

Though he was starting to believe the stone and his vanishing act on the bike trail were more than a little related, he kept it to himself. He didn’t want to out-crazy Uncle Z just yet.

“Hmmm...where have I seen this before? Makes me wish I kept the book from my archeology course back in college. Let me think about this, C-lion. You get out there and shred that kicker, *compadre!*”

Uncle Z wandered off muttering to himself and scratching his head. Corey’s mom gave him a knowing look and followed. Corey grabbed his gear and headed up the hill to the half-pipe.

He watched each of his classmates drop in on the ramp. Whether it was the height of the walls or the pressure of the watching crowd, half of whom were dressed in the hottest gear and schmoozing as only Hollywood-ers know how, nobody seemed to be able to get much air.

Sly attempted an aerial turn and ate ramp because of it, but was able to salvage his run with a couple quick kick-turns at the end. Epyx was able to pull off a hand-plant, which got a few appreciative claps and a hoot from the announcer on the loudspeaker. After building up enough speed, Tiffani was throwing out kick-turns left and right but bailed at the end with a wince-inducing crash off the ramp. She still managed a shaky thumbs up as she stumbled away from the half-pipe.

And then there was Jake, riding a brand new board (of course) and spitting out aerial turns like a slot machine. It was pretty clear who would be winning this game, even before all the skaters got their first run in, let alone the second. Jake may as well have been Steve Caballero, holding hand-plants forever, transitioning to a kick-turn and making it all look easy. How was Corey ever going to follow that?

Well, he'd have to find a way, because now it was his turn. Before he knew it Corey found himself standing at the edge of the ramp. He scanned the crowd but couldn't find his mom and Uncle Z. He did see Sly nervously sidling closer to Epyx, who was busy cheering him on.

Corey shut his eyes, exhaled all his breath and imagined himself back on Radley's backyard ramp. He could hear the announcer's voice booming in the background as he recounted Corey's unlikely win at the BMX event.

If all else fails, he thought, I'll always have Sheep Hills.

He opened his eyes once more and dropped in. Down he went, and back up the other side.

And down. And up. And down, and up, and down, and up, and down again, and, just for a change of pace, he went up.

No matter what he did or how hard he pushed, all Corey could seem to do was glide endlessly up and down the sides of the ramp, not falling but not getting anywhere near enough to the edge to get any air or even pull off a kick-turn. Now he knew how all the other non-Jake skaters felt. It was like the ramp was made out of molasses.

Despite his lack of speed or altitude, Corey decided he had better try something, so he pulled out a tentative kick-turn and promptly fell flat on his face.

He scrambled to the top of the ramp again and dropped in, not wanting to glance at the faces in the crowd. Once again, he did the up-down boogie for about 30 seconds then tried again for a quick turn. Once again, his helmeted head met the unforgiving plywood. *Bummer!*

And just like that, the buzzer rang and the announcer cheerfully summed up his flawlessly terrible run of zero points. Corey wished the ramp would open up and swallow him whole. He skulked away, barely registering the consoling pats on the back from his friends and family.

What had happened up there? Sure, he was no Caballero or even Jake Sommers, but he was able to pull off at least a few hand-plants and kick-turns back on Radley's ramp. All the confidence he had slowly built up while psyching himself up for the run now drained from his body. He felt as useless as a wet noodle stuck to the side of the pot, destined to get scraped down the drain.

Uncle Z jogged up to him with a wild grin. He huffed and puffed for a few seconds with his hands on his knees before slapping the smooth circular stone back into Corey's hands.

"C-monster! (*buff*) Your mom gave me a ride. (*puff*) LA county library downtown and you're not gonna believe it. (*wheeze*) This right here is a (*gulp*) genuine Chumash power stone!"

Corey's confusion pulled him out of his funk. "A Chu-what now?"

Z was still catching his breath. "Native Americans. Lived around here a thousand years ago. used to grind them down, hand 'em out to their fiercest warriors. Valuable, too. Five hundred big ones in the rare gem and stone index! Supposed to do wonders for your balance and agility. They say the guys who carried these things were unstoppable, magic even. Spanish Missionaries swear they saw a Chumash warrior carrying one of these things walk on the waves, right along the shoreline!"

Corey turned the stone over in his hand, regarding it in a new light.

Magic? Of course, it was absurd, but so too were the events of the last week. The dreams, the visions, the unexplainable boost he received to win the BMX race at Sheep Hills against all odds.

And it had to be a little more than a coincidence that the only time he had been separated from this strange object since finding it last weekend, he had ended up totally biting it on the half-pipe.

Now with his uncle nodding away at him, Corey was forced to consider an entirely new scenario: magic was real, and he was holding a piece of it right here in his hand. The implications were enormous and more than a little unsettling.

Before it could really sink in, Corey heard his name being thunderously repeated over the loudspeaker. As the lowest score on the

first run, he had the distinct privilege of going first on the second run. He groaned audibly as he turned right back around and re-strapped his helmet, slipping the stone in his pocket.

Z gave him an encouraging thumbs up before disappearing once more into the crowd. With everything running through his head, Corey barely felt the fresh cuts and bruises, which was just as well since he was likely on his way to earning more.

Instead, Corey felt an immediate difference upon dropping in. Now he positively glided across the half pipe, seemingly gaining speed even on the flat middle expanse.

In no time at all he was catching air off the lip of the ramp. He tried a few tentative half-turns and surprised himself by remaining vertical. He then tried a hand-plant and the deftness with which he executed the maneuver surprised the crowd as well.

Everything was going great, but Corey didn't want to push it. He pulled off a few more kick turns and hand plants, but spent most of the rest of his run carving back and forth across the length of the pipe. Finally, with seconds to spare, he went for an aerial turn and nailed it.

The crowd clapped in appreciation, and Sly heard an atonal chorus of congratulations from his personal cheering section, consisting of Uncle Z, his mom, Sly and Epyx.

He slid to a stop, picked up his board, and jogged lightly toward the enthusiastic high-fives of his friends and family.

The rest of the competitors took their turn. Some did as well as Corey; most did worse. Jake was, as always, impeccable.

Due to his crap-tacular first run, Corey ended up coming in fourth. Not bad, and certainly good enough to keep him in the running for the next event.

Jake came in first, and Tiffani, Sly and Epyx all scored enough to move on as well. The announcer screamed his hearty congratulations and reminded the gathered crowd of competitors, supporters, well-wishers and hangers-on not to miss next week's skating event at Venice Beach, where the grand prize and special celebrity guest for the winner of the California Games would be announced!

The event was over, and burly dudes in neon jogging shorts started disassembling the ramp. It was a little unnerving to see the sturdy ramp he had recently entrusted his life to so efficiently deconstructed.

While chatting with Sly and Epyx, Corey noticed Tiffani puttering around in his peripheral vision, wearing what could almost be called a scowl. He steeled his nerves and approached her.

“What’s up, Tiff?”

“Hey, Corey.”

“Something wrong? Still hurting from the fall?”

“That was nothing! Just a couple bruises, I’ll be fine. No, it’s Jake. I came in third place, and he couldn’t care less! He knows how hard I practiced for this, but all he seems to want to talk about were how rad his aerial turns were, and how he held a hand-plant longer than anyone else. It’s like, we get it, Jake, you’re God’s gift to skateboarding. Save some ego for the rest of us.”

Corey had never had a girl confide in him before, and wasn’t sure how to respond.

“That sucks. Jake sounds like he really...sucks. To practice that hard and not have your boyfriend even notice, well that...totally...sucks.”

Smooth as sandpaper.

“He’s not my boyfriend! He’s just...I dunno, I thought he was a cool guy, but turns out he’s just a jerk! Thanks for your help, Corey.”

She gave him a quick hug. Corey kinda forgot whether he was supposed to be breathing in or breathing out.

“Anyway my parents are out of town next weekend. I’m having some friends over after the skating event. You should stop by. And bring your friend Sam?”

Corey still hadn’t gotten the whole breathing thing down, so he just nodded vigorously as his face slowly darkened to a bright pink. Sure. Sam. Party. Great!

“And hey, good job out there! If they had an award for most improved, you’d win for sure! You’ve got an amazing sense of balance. Weren’t you the one last year who tripped over his backpack while it was still on his back? Come to think of it, that must have taken some coordination...”

Corey found his breath again, but was not thrilled with the words it chose to form. “Don’t really remember that. Must have been someone else. Party! Sound fun. See you there? Bye now.”

He awkwardly waved and skated away before his caveman act could continue. It was a wonder he didn't start blathering about magic stones; that would have really freaked her out.

"Hey there, smooth operator!"

Uncle Z strolled up and proceeded to elbow him in the ribs.

"Can't seem to keep the girls off ya, eh? Who can blame them when they're in the presence of such a master athlete! Seems like the Chumash stone helped after all!"

His mother approached with a smile that was a little less wide. "So who's this young lady? Do I know her? You *know* I do aerobics with a lot of the parents from school..."

Corey could think of about a million things he'd rather do than talk about Tiffani, up to and including take fork to the eye. "It's nobody, mom. Just a friend. Can we get something to eat? I'm starved!"

Corey wanted pancakes, and Z was craving a Denver omelet, so they piled into his mom's minivan and set off in search of a diner still serving breakfast.

Chapter 4

Pause

Corey was back on the wooded hillside he had dreamed of previously.

Despite the fact that it had only been two weeks, it felt like ages ago. As if to emphasize this point, the sun and moon above kicked into high gear and started racing each other across their respective horizons. It made everything look like one of those time lapse films they played in biology class to show the decomposition of a fox's body, or a flower's bending bloom toward sunshine.

He heard a voice immediately behind him.

"The past is gone. It goes by like dusk to dawn."

Corey whirled around and found himself face to face with an impossibly old American Indian. What's more, this ancient Indian's face was unmistakably familiar, and Corey knew in an instant this was the same man who had been haunting his thoughts.

"You...you're the one I've been seeing for weeks! Ever since that dream with the tornado. And teleporting at Sheep Hills. What was that all about, anyway?"

"Patience, Corey Phillips. All will be revealed in time."

The old, old man looked Corey up and down with a wizened eye and a half smile.

"I swear, by the ancestors, they seem to get younger every time. It has not been many moons since you were a toddling child, has it?"

"Uh, I guess? What's this all about? And who *are* you?"

"My real name belongs only to legend. This legend you may someday learn...but not today. Today you may call me Greatfather. As for what this is about, that is a longer and far more important tale."

The dance of the sun and the moon continued, and so too did the wizened old man.

“A very long time ago, before time itself, in fact, earth was ruled by twin goddesses: Paluta, Queen of Light, and Medula, Queen of Darkness. Paluta lived in the realm of light, and during the day time bestowed plentiful crops and much beauty upon the living creatures of the land. At night, however, the evil Medula would have it her way, causing crops to fail and many creatures to lose their way in the all-encompassing blackness.

“In a bid to take over the light kingdom and rule all of earth, Medula issued a challenge to Paluta: send forth your mightiest athlete to compete against the chosen one of the dark realm in a series of challenges. Whichever side wins shall rule earth for all eternity, and the other be banished, never again to walk the earth.

“Paluta knew the risk of accepting such a challenge; so too did she realize that she must somehow put a stop to the evil deeds being done by Medula and her minions. Reluctantly, Paluta agreed. On the chosen day, she selected the finest athlete from among the first people. Krash was his name. Paluta sent Krash to face Tod, the dark spirit chosen by Medula. They battled in many different arenas. Hurdling, swimming, jumping and fighting. But in the end, Krash was victorious, and sent Tod back to Medula in shame.

“Enraged, Medula destroyed Tod with a single blow. But she too was bound to the agreement made, and retreated into the dark realm from which she has never returned. However, trickster that she is, Medula still has a way of influencing the world. Every so often, she builds up enough power to unleash disaster, be it from the sky, sea or earth. Such catastrophic events the first people—the Chumash people—have long labored to prevent.”

“So if this is all true...what does it have to do with me?”

“Everybody has their dues in life to pay, Corey Phillips. Because of their sworn duty to protect the earth from the wrath of Medula, the Chumash have great respect for the skill and agility of the warrior athlete. Every 30 years a Chumash warrior is selected and bequeathed the stone of power which grants him great agility and strength. Wielding this stone, the warrior must enter and win a great sporting challenge. Only then will the world be saved from Medula’s wrath.

“Corey, you are directly descended from a great line of Chumash warriors and athletes. Many in your bloodline have faced such a challenge in ages past and succeeded. Still others have faced the challenge and been

found wanting. It is now your turn to attempt this feat. These California Games you compete in are more than they appear; as you may have already guessed, you have been given the stone of power.

“I realize that this must be a heavy burden. The demands placed upon the chosen Chumash warrior are often great, but so too is the powerful stone at your disposal. To realize its fullest power, you must ever keep the stone of power close to your heart. With the power of this and your ancestors behind you, you must win the Games of California. Bring honor to your family and the Chumash people, and save the world from great devastation!”

With a wave of his hand, Greatfather slowed the sun and the moon. But the sky above kept growing darker. Though he had many more questions for the wise old man, somehow Corey knew that this dream was nearing its end. The wooded hilltop faded, and he regarded his advisor with confusion, awe, and what he hoped was at least a little bit of resolve.

As Corey’s consciousness retreated into murky shadow, he faintly heard Greatfather call out: “In ancient Chumash tradition, I leave you with a riddle. You must reflect on this and gain meaning!”

His last words pierced the inky blackness, clear as a bell:

“You have to lose, to know how to win!”

* * *

click “Half my liiiiiife’s in books’ written pages...live and leeeaaarn from fools and from sages...”

Morning, again. Bright. So it’s...morning...Satur-uhhhh...*Saturday morning!*

Corey sprang from bed, threw on shorts and a t-shirt and slapped his clock radio on the way to the bathroom.

While staring into the mirror, Corey’s dream came back to him in vivid detail. His brushing slowed to a crawl and eventually stopped altogether as he went over the tale spun by the old man. It was like something out of his Social Studies textbook...big and mythical and scary and fantastic. Corey hadn’t yet figured out the best lunch spot at school; there was no way he was ready to take on the lead role in an epic quest.

With every passing second the dream seemed less real and more like an opaque memory, as dreams tend to do. Though he couldn’t help but keep the story in the back of his head, Corey tried his best to brush off its importance as he finished getting ready, chalking it up to nervousness about the coming competition.

He was about to head out the door when he spied the Chumash store resting innocently on his nightstand. This was the one thing that could not be explained away, that really did seem to give him superhuman dexterity and ability. He would have more time to think this all over after the skating event later today. Impulsively, he used a length of cinnamon dental floss to tie the Chumash stone around his neck before heading out the door.

Chapter 5

Skating

Venice Beach was a rare outlier on the ritzy, sun-dappled Southern California coast. The beach was the Disneyland of its day; on any given weekend 80 years ago you could find half of Los Angeles strolling the boardwalk, competing in fixed games for shoddy prizes, riding the rickety wooden roller-coaster.

As the city's attention focused elsewhere, this pleasure park by the sea slowly degraded and transformed into a haven for beatniks, hippies and burnouts, but the carnival-like atmosphere of the boardwalk remained. By now, its rough-around-the-edges nature just added to the unique charm. Corey soaked in the grime, the sun and the muttering and manic weirdoes wandering the boardwalk. He waited for the race to begin.

For once, Uncle Z had no need to source his gear; Corey had a pair of rollerblades in scuffed-but-decent shape from two birthdays ago. His uncle still dutifully drove him up the 405 to Venice, but Corey figured this was more so he could meet up with his old college roommates. Especially since he was here an hour early and Z was already nowhere to be found.

Corey took the extra time to study what would be the skating course, basically a normal stretch of the boardwalk sectioned off with bright orange construction cones. The setting was picturesque but made for less than ideal racing terrain. Every dozen or so yards there was grass poking through the boardwalk, or a cracked and rotting board. Errant beach balls would bounce onto the course sporadically, and there were sections where the sand of the beach had spilled halfway across the boardwalk. To top it all off, every block or so featured street performers juggling torches, break dancing or doing some fancy-foot street skateboard tricks. Try as they might, the flimsy cones set up by the California Games organizers would have a hard time controlling this chaos. Corey would have to keep a vigilant eye as he navigated the course to avoid wiping out.

Luckily, he had some assistance.

He fingered the stone as last night's dream returned in bits and pieces. Some crazy story about goddesses and ancient Indian warriors and the chosen one. Everything had been getting so weird since he found this little piece of rock out on Sheep Hills. If this was really about legend and fate and all that nonsense, how big of a part was Corey supposed to play? And what did that crazy old Indian guy mean when he said he had to lose to win?

The more he thought about it, the more nervous he got, and the less he wanted any part of it. He wished someone would reach out of the sky, take control, and point him in a new direction.

As he contemplated all this, he heard someone approach from behind. It was Jake, decked out in a brand new lime green tank top and his signature shades, with a guitar case slung over one shoulder.

"Sup, Chad. Your parents drop you off early too?"

"It's...Corey. And, yeah, my uncle's meeting up with some friends of his."

"Corey...right on, bro."

He took out his guitar and strummed some open chords in a distracted way.

"You had some moves on the half-pipe last weekend. And winning the bike race at Sheep Hills? Pretty impressive, dude. 'Course, it's only because my game was so off that day. You see my Sheep shot in *Freestylin'* magazine last June?"

Everyone at school had seen Jake's shot in *Freestylin'*. He talked it up so much, Outer Mongolia had probably seen Jake's shot in *Freestylin'*. "Nah, Jake, I must have missed it."

"Well, anyway, when did you get so good? Weren't you the kid who tripped over his own backpack?"

Man, that story spread fast. And there was no way Corey was going to launch into some tale about magic stones and prophecy without making himself seem like even more of a fruitcake. He decided to plead the fifth.

"I dunno. Just got lucky, I guess. Where are your skates?"

"Tiff's bringing 'em. We were supposed to meet and warm up but of course she's late."

"Well, I'm sure she has a good reason."

Jake gave an exaggerated sigh. "She always does," he muttered, while rolling his eyes. He started strumming a song Corey found familiar. He was going to ask about it when Jake beat him to the punch.

"Yeah, it's 'Heaven,' by Warrant. My step-dad is their guitar tech and taught me the whole thing."

Jake had made an art form of casual cockiness, but there was almost something desperate about his easy smile and breezy attitude. For the first time ever, Corey found himself considering how much hard work it took to be the coolest kid in school. He almost felt sorry for Jake until he remembered all of his brand new clothes and gear and totally hot girlfriend. Suddenly he just wanted to get out of there, and started lacing up his rollerblades. Jake was lost in thought, strumming his guitar and staring out to sea.

"Well, speaking of warm-ups, I'm gonna take a few practice runs. Good luck, Jake."

Jake gave him a thumbs up and another million-dollar smile. "Take it easy, man!"

As Corey skated away, he heard him call out, "And try not to trip!"

He could not believe he almost felt sorry for that jerk.

* * *

It was high noon, and the competitors were lined up on the Venice Beach Boardwalk. The announcer was busy reciting the names of the kids who had made it this far. The list grew shorter and shorter with each event, and Corey marveled that he and all of his schoolmates remained on it.

Jake, Tiffani and Epyx were all proving to be pretty great athletes, and Corey had the magic Chumash stone around his neck. Sly seemed to be hanging on through luck and some bull-headed determination to remain in the running with his new-found crush.

Now the announcer was talking up the school-wide pizza party that went to the grand winner of the California Games and the special musical guest who would attend and perform. With all the other crazy stakes Corey had discovered over the past few weeks, he had almost forgotten this aspect of the contest.

Not being much of a radio listener, Corey did not join in the gasping and high-fiving when the loudspeaker finally announced the name Milli Vanilli. He had a vague image of two brightly dressed dudes stepping in rhythm to synthesized drum beats. They were brothers, maybe? In any

case, this appeared to be a *very big deal* among his competitors.

With that announcement out of the way, the race was set to begin. Corey was glad he had taken a few practice runs and knew what obstacles to expect and where. Whether it was this warm-up or the effect of the Chumash stone, the pre-race jitters Corey had about legend and destiny and all that were gone. Now he was just focused on winning.

He gave a cursory wave to Sly and Epyx at the other side of the line-up before turning his focus inward.

The buzzer sang and Corey was off like a bolt of lightning. He hopped easily over a patch of grass and dodged a bouncing beach ball. He flew over a raised section of boardwalk and sailed past a pile of encroaching sand. He nimbly sidestepped a particularly fragrant hippie spreading his hand-blown wares out on a filthy poncho. He was unstoppable!

But just when he thought he was sure to win the race, Venice Beach spat out one of the random, ridiculous groups of human entertainment it was world-famous for producing: it was a trio of mimes.

Pulling on their invisible rope right into Corey's peripheral vision, he knew he was too late to stop or slow himself or even cry out. Not even the power of the Chumash stone could keep him from colliding with the three street performers, who now appeared to be trapped inside an imaginary box. From the looks on their faces as he hurtled toward them, they had some serious doubts about the sturdiness of its construction.

Corey barreled into the hapless mimes, sending all four of them sprawling as he unceremoniously flopped face-first onto the boardwalk.

There was a smattering of confused clapping from the assembled crowd, unsure if this was part of the act. When Corey opened his eyes he was face to face with one of the mimes, and underneath the greasepaint recognized a particularly familiar face.

"*C-monster?*" Uncle Z whispered.

"Z! When you said hang out with friends I didn't think..." Corey did some inarticulate miming of his own. "I didn't think this!"

Perhaps thinking it would fool the audience, Uncle Z replied in a stage whisper. "Well, Jerry's been taking these classes at the Y, and we've always been a theatrical bunch. It feels good to perform again!"

"Well do you have to perform in the middle of the skating course?!"

"Sorry about that, little man. This is our first time out 'in the

open.’ Jerry didn’t warn us about how busy it gets, and apparently environmental awareness training isn’t taught until the advanced course. Uh...don’t you have a race to win?”

Corey glanced wildly around. Not seeing any other skaters, he groaned and sprang to his feet as smoothly as his clunky rollerblades would allow. Leaving his Uncle to sort out his own mess, Corey rolled away on his skates.

He continued dodging and juking and generally flying through the course at the same pace as before, but still didn’t see any other skaters and assumed his unexpected rendezvous with his uncle had cost him the race. So Corey was genuinely bewildered when he tore across the finish line and heard an eruption of applause. The loudspeaker crackled to life.

“COREY PHILLIPS WINS THE SKATING EVENT BY A COUNTRY MILE! DID YOU SEE HIS MOVES? NO OBSTACLE COULD STOP HIM! THIS KID MUST HAVE LIGHTNING IN HIS LEGS! COREY IS MOST CERTAINLY PROCEEDING TO THE NEXT ROUND OF...THE CALIFORNIA GAMES!”

As he stood, bewildered, accepting congratulations from vague acquaintances and strangers alike, Corey touched the stone around his neck and murmured a silent thanks to whatever gods Greatfather was talking about in his dream.

The rest of the racers straggled in as he began unlacing his rollerblades. Not wanting to stick around and get too many sour looks from the competitors he had bested, he shared a few quick greetings with his friends and set off to liberate his Uncle from the pack of mimes so that he could catch a ride home.

* * *

Later that night, at Tiffani’s party, Corey learned the real story: all of his friends had been waylaid by various obstacles on the skate course. Epyx got too much sand in her skates and crashed into a pile of beach umbrellas, while Sly got his skates tangled in a pile of hemp carpets being hawked by a decidedly distracted hippie. Tiffani got caught in a gauntlet of synchronized hula-hoopers. Even that smug jerk Jake was held up by a group of Hare Krishnas with tiny finger cymbals.

Corey had been right; the cones set up to ostensibly mark the race course had failed to perform their one job. He had won simply by being in first place when the chaotic Venice boardwalk finally overtook the skating race.

Tiffani’s parents were on an extended vacation in Thailand and had left Tiffani and the house under the supervision of Tiffani’s sister

Dana, who had promptly headed to Tahoe with her boyfriend Ron for the weekend. Tiffani did what was pretty much required of a popular girl whose family had skipped town and left their beautiful beach home totally empty: she threw a killer party.

By the time Corey had arrived things were already in full swing. Epyx and Sly were tied up playing Tiff and Jake on the pool table, so Corey grabbed a Mr. Pibb and wandered around the home. The spacious residence was done up in the sort of pastel and white wicker that was so popular with Southern California women of a certain income bracket.

Draped across every piece of furniture and spread in small clusters around the main living space were kids he recognized from school, as well as some from neighboring schools and a few older kids who might have been home from college. As he gauged the various levels of idiocy and boisterous behavior on display, Corey slowly realized that he must have been the only person *not* drinking at this party.

He felt an almost comforting sense of exclusion wash over him that was quickly broken by a chorus of shouts from some dudes who had seen Corey win the race at Venice Beach that afternoon. He fielded questions and high-fives about his gear and racing style with little more than a shrug and a smile, stating that it would be bad karma to reveal his secret to winning both the skating and BMX events. Thankfully, this seemed to appease the dudes.

Epyx and Tiffani found him out on the deck overlooking the bay. The two had apparently become fast friends during the billiards game and were quizzing each other about favorite movies and the best stores at their respective malls. Jake and Sly had both insisted they could beat the other at *Tecmo Bowl* and were in another room putting themselves to the test.

After a moment of chatting they heard a loud commotion from around the corner, followed by someone bellowing "*Woo! I just fell through a screen door!*"

Tiffani excused herself, leaving Epyx and Corey outside. They watched the boats roll in off the bay for a minute before she turned to him.

"Is there something you're not telling me? The way Sly talks you guys hang out at the library most days arguing about comic books. Then you go and beat some of the most talented kids in our age bracket in not one but *two* events. Are you some kind of secret sports superhero? Or is this like some *Hill Street Blues* thing and you're actually a 26-year-old pretending to be a high-schooler?"

Despite being sober, Corey was struck by the crazy notion that this girl he barely knew would understand and believe the situation he was in. He proceeded to rattle off all the strange things that had been happening to him, up to and including dreaming of someone called Greatfather imploring him to fulfill Chumash prophecy and avert impending disaster by winning the California Games.

Epyx listened, nodding helpfully and keeping an admirably straight face up until the very end, when a hidden smile finally won out. She started laughing, her bright eyes reflecting the moonlight off the bay.

“Come on, really? A magic stone disk, an Indian prophecy, freakin’ *teleportation*? It’s okay to swipe a story from a comic book, but at least be up front about it. If you don’t want to tell me it’s cool, but know I’ll be keeping an eye on you next weekend at the foot bag event. Oh yeah, I’ll be watching you like a *hawk*!”

Had he really expected Epyx to believe him? He wasn’t even sure if he believed it himself. He tried to change the topic. “Yeah, uh, I guess it is a little out there. So...Sly’s not calling me to get Slurpees nearly as often anymore. Does that have anything to do with you two spending more time together?”

“No! Yes. I mean...well, it’s complicated.”

Corey raised his eyebrows and Epyx socked him in the shoulder.

“Not like that! We’re just friends, and we actually have a lot to talk about. I don’t want to go into too many details, but I spent the last couple of years being shuffled between my mom, my grandma and my older sister, depending on how my parents chose to sort out their lives at the time. It’s been a little rough. And Sly’s parents apparently can’t support or even show a basic interest in any of the things he does. And his older brother’s into skateboarding and stuff but is also super competitive. His whole family just barely seems to hold together.”

Corey stared down at his can of soda while Epyx gazed out over the water. He spoke quietly. “Don’t tell him I told you this, but Sly and his brother were both adopted. My dad told me a few years ago. I can’t remember why. He also told me not to tell Sly, but I’m pretty sure he knows. I mean, he looks nothing like his mom or dad. Or his brother, for that matter.”

Epyx let this sink in for a minute. “Wow...I had no idea, but now that you say that it makes a lot of sense. It’s like, his parents feed him and send him to school and all that, but you never see them at any of the events. I’ve never even met them, and Sly certainly doesn’t have a lot of great things to say about them.”

“So, yeah, we both have had kind of a rough time, and so we put up these shields. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a total motor-mouth. I’d much rather be talking things through than lost in thought, ‘cause that’s when too many bad things come up. And Sly’s got this total goofball exterior and a dingy old hat he found in his attic, but under all that he’s just so desperate to please. God, it sounds so cheesy when I say it like that. It’s like a stupid after-school special.”

“Well, y’know, art imitates life and all that.”

This got a small chuckle from Epyx. Corey was in the dangerous position of knowing he had to say something yet not having any idea what it was. He doubted even Chumash magic was going to help here, and decided to wing it before the pause stretched on any longer.

“But, hey, you two are great. I couldn’t ask for better friends. You’re smarter than all those other kids at school who only seem to care about scoring beer and stealing tapes from the mall. You’re working through some stuff, but that’s what growing up is for, right? I mean, we’re not kids. Well, we kind of are, but we’re in the ninth grade! We’re almost adults, and adults have problems. That’s just how it works. Stop me because I’m rambling, and I’m not nearly as good at it as you are.”

Another laugh. “I know what you mean, Corey, and trust me, it helps. I’ve just met you guys but I think you’re great, too.” She turned away from the bay and let out a low whistle. “Wow. First your crazy dream, then all this mushy-feelings business. Are you always this much fun at parties?”

“Can’t say. I’m not often invited to them. All this winning seems to have launched me a little higher up the social scale.”

Before he could continue, Jake and Sly burst onto the patio. Jake was high-fiving everyone in sight as Sly slunk over to them. He called over his shoulder.

“Yeah, we’ll just see what happens in San Francisco! Real life is a lot harder than Nintendo!”

Jake didn’t even hear him. Epyx consoled Sly on his crushing *Tecmo Bowl* defeat.

Because goodbyes were one of the least-rehearsed parts of his party repertoire, and because he didn’t want the night to get any weirder, Corey slipped out the back gate of the patio and headed home.

Chapter 6

Foot Bag

Corey was halfway to San Francisco on the 5 when everything went to bullcrap.

The smell, that is: this part of Central California was overwhelmingly cattle country, and even with the windows rolled up the stench of this stretch of road reflected it.

But he was none too pleased with the driving situation, either. His mom had to go to a Tupperware party, whatever the heck that was, and uncle Z was driving Sly, whose parents balked at a six-hour drive just to let their son kick a bean bag around. That left one person miraculously free to drive Corey: his father.

When the dilemma arose earlier that week, he had promised to clear his schedule for the overnight trip to the event in San Francisco. And, for once, it appeared he actually did. Corey was sure he would slip away for a few business calls once they got to the city, but for now it was just him and his father barreling through the assorted fragrances of California's main intrastate thoroughfare.

Dad had, of course, been brought up to speed on Corey's recent winning streak and he had tried for the past few hours to engage his son in conversation about it, to little success. Corey had a more-or-less polite relationship with his dad but they seemed to operate on two different wavelengths, and there was no way he was going to open up about his weird Chumash dream and all of its corresponding hocus pocus to a guy who still regarded contact lenses as a major technological breakthrough.

A somewhat familiar song started to play on the radio, and Corey's dad turned it up.

"Milli Vanilla, right? These guys are gonna play for whoever wins! Pretty exciting stuff!"

"It's Milli *Vanilli*, dad. And yeah, I guess so. I don't really listen to

them, but everyone at school seems pretty pumped. They think I'm going to win it all because I won two events. I keep telling them the Games are only half over, but I'm not sure that I'm getting through."

"Aw, your pals are just excited. And they should be. You're really doing great, buddy! I feel awful that I couldn't make the other events, but here we are heading up to San Fran together, just like I said! And I promise I'm doing everything I can to make it to the next two events. I want to be there to cheer you on when you win..."

A look from Corey corrected him.

"...If you win it all."

Though he went on about various sporting events of his youth, Corey mostly tuned him out as he turned his weapon of choice over in his fingers.

Uncle Z couldn't drive him up but he did provide Corey with a gently-used foot bag. In this case used was better than new, because the soft leather and inner beans had been worked loose and allowed for better control and shock absorption. Foot bag design wasn't exactly rocket science, but you didn't want to be playing with a brand new, rock-solid bag in an event like this. Z had said it was one of his best bags from back in his Venice Beach days, when he spent a few summers cultivating a world-class sunburn, kicking it around for hours on the boardwalk.

At some point Corey became aware that his father was asking him a question.

"You have your lucky rock with you, right? I didn't see it on your nightstand before you left."

Corey's hand went unconsciously to where the Chumash stone was hanging around his neck. *How did his dad know?* He relaxed a bit after remembering the discussion they had after the BMX race.

He nodded at his father and forced a smile. Still, he couldn't quite shake the too-casual way in which his dad brought up the Chumash stone, and he definitely saw some kind of recognition pass over his father's face when he first spotted the stone in Corey's bedroom.

He was still mulling this over as they drove over the Oakland Bay Bridge, and into the heart of San Francisco.

* * *

Since there were only a few dozen competitors left in the California Games, the organizers had graciously booked everyone rooms in a North Beach Holiday Inn, near Fisherman's Wharf and the Presidio

park where the day's foot bag event was scheduled to take place. The event was scheduled to begin at 5 PM, a few hours before sunset.

Pulling up to Crissy Field revealed a wide, flat expanse of green grass running along the bay couple with an unbelievable view. To the left, the Golden Gate Bridge blazed in the late afternoon sun as the horizon gently receded into the hazy hillside town of Sausalito. To the right, the infamous island of Alcatraz loomed menacingly as gigantic cargo ships weaved their way toward the ports of Hayward and Oakland set deeper in the bay. Corey and his dad simultaneously let out a low whistle. It was going to be hard to concentrate on a tiny little foot bag amid all this unrelenting majesty.

But concentrate he must; Corey was an average foot-bagger at best, and the competition would be increasingly fierce as they headed into the final events. All of the magical coordination in the world wasn't going to save him if he couldn't execute the complicated tricks necessary to score points. He left his dad deciding on the placement of what looked like a brand new folding lawn chair (relaxing had never really been Dad's strong suit) to walk the perimeter of the field and scope out his competition.

From what he could see, foot bag involved side-kicks, knee-pops, head-butts and a whole lot of shuffling from side to side. Corey also saw more than a few precisely timed 180 and 360 degree spins. He reached under his collar to lay a reassuring hand on the Chumash stone.

He decided it couldn't hurt to do a little practicing of his own. He started with some simple knee and leg-work to get a feel for the bag before tentatively trying for a half axle: a 180 spin followed by an inside kick.

When that went fairly well, Corey got a little more ambitious with some head-butts, followed by a horseshoe (an outside left kick over the head to an outside right kick).

Finally, he pulled out the big guns and went for a dizzy dean (a full axle with a head butt in the middle) and finished with an axle foley (three full axles in between hits). He performed all of these moves flawlessly, though he ended up more than a little dizzy and had to sit down.

While resting he spied Epyx and Sly huddled at the opposite end of Crissy Field. He was about to head over to them when he saw Sly spring up from the ground and start some sort of wild dance, spinning his arms like propellers and stomping his feet. Sly looked equally mystified and amused, as though his face couldn't decide whether to guffaw or cry

out for help. A smile won out, and Corey decided that whatever was going on there, he was going to give them some space.

Corey felt a slap on his back as Jake moseyed up next to him. Tiffani was with him, looking fairly sullen.

“Sup, Chuck. Got any tricks up your sleeve today? Looks like your buddy Sly’s got a few!” He nodded toward the still wildly gesticulating Sly. “Me, I could do this stuff in my sleep. I spent last summer at my step-mom’s cottage on Catalina and foot bag was about the only fun thing to do there. I bet I score more points in the first 30 seconds than either of you nerds.”

He laughed and jogged away. Tiffani followed, but suddenly turned and came back to Corey.

“Jake’s just pissed because both his parents were too busy to come up here with him. My mom offered to drive him but oh no, Jake’s way too cool for that. I think he ended up taking the bus. He’s staying with his uncle somewhere near the Castro. Anyway, whenever he tells his Catalina story, he always leaves out that he busted his bag the first week there and had to practice with a balled up sock.” She rolled her eyes and walked off after her boyfriend.

The thought of Jake kicking a smelly gym sock around the beach for three months made Corey smile. The fact that Tiffani spent over a minute addressing him directly made him smile even wider.

Still, he couldn’t understand what she saw in that vain jerk. Spending time in Jake’s general vicinity had revealed that, beneath the cool as ice exterior, Jake had more faults than San Andreas.

Ugh. Corey did not often wince at his own jokes, but this one seemed to warrant it. The rest of the competitors were slowly gathering for the event so he let it slide, did some quick stretches and joined them.

* * *

Much like the half-pipe event, everyone took turns competing one at a time, so there wasn’t much to do but check out the other kids’ moves while Corey waited for his turn.

There were plenty of axles, dodas, arches, and even a few head-bangers and dizzy deans in the mix. Every so often someone wouldn’t shuffle fast enough and whiff a kick, but by and large the runs went smoothly. The announcer yelled out the names and point values of the tricks as they were executed.

When it was his turn Corey focused more on his flow than on a grab bag of tricks. He did mostly arches and dodas with an occasional

horseshoe or reverse doda in the mix. Mostly he tried to keep his rhythm steady and his timing impeccable; the superior balance of the Chumash stone helped with this, and since he was no Jake Sommers, foot bag superstar with an arsenal of showy maneuvers, consistency in his execution was key.

It paid off. As he packed as many tricks as he could into a smooth run he heard some whispering and quietly appreciative clapping as his run neared its end.

The clock wound down to zero and he decided to go for broke. He did a jester (a close-range side kick with a head tilt to the side) to a head-banger (a quick downward smack with the forehead to a knee hit) before finishing with an arch that sailed 15 feet in the air. The crowd erupted in applause and, not knowing what else to do, he did a quick bow as the announcer called out his score.

As the event wore on the competitors all tried to one-up each other by kicking their foot bags higher and higher, high enough to hit a bird...and there were so many birds! You'd think the seagulls would avoid this airspace, with all of its random projectiles, but they continued to obliviously sail overhead.

There were many close calls and even a few direct hits, which didn't seem to injure the birds but did result in a startled squawk and a cheer from the crowd. Corey shook his head. Wasn't this city supposed to be the epicenter of the summer of love?

His Uncle Z was right, the 60s were long gone.

Speaking of Z, Corey spied him in a ridiculously small tie-dye shirt and ratty headband, perched next to Dad on his own well-worn folding beach chair. (The art of relaxing was followed much more studiously by Z.) Every so often Uncle Z would lean over and whisper some encouragement to Sly, who was still mumbling at the foot bag clutched in his hand. *Whatever it takes*, Corey thought.

Tiffani went next with an impressive run that was even more graceful than his. It made sense; she was on cheer and gymnastics and spent two-thirds of the year working on coordination.

Next up was Jake, who strutted confidently onto the field and immediately started busting out dizzy deans, full axles and jesters left and right.

About halfway through his run, with a dumb smirk still plastered on his face, Jake started in on the axle foleys. He did about five in a row, making 15 full rotations.

At this point his grin turned a bit manic and went half-way to a grimace. He lost his balance and fell backwards onto his butt before turning his head and totally spewing everywhere.

Corey couldn't believe his eyes. He glanced over to his friends and family who shared his surprise. The medic assigned to the event sprang into action and hustled Jake to the first aid tent. The announcer shouted in as sorry a voice he could muster that Jake Sommers would unfortunately be disqualified for an incomplete run.

The crowd groaned audibly, but Corey couldn't make himself feel too bad. Everyone knew what happened when Icarus flew too close to the sun. Corey and Jake's English class had *just covered* that story. At least Corey had paid attention.

The final competitor was Sly Winkle. Corey gave a yell when his name was announced, but nowhere near as loud as Epyx (who had gone earlier and had a decent run, but seemed to share Corey's mediocrity at foot bag, without the assistance of a magical stone disk). Sly trotted out to the field and did a few quick stretches before starting his run.

And what run it was. No sooner was his foot bag in the air than Sly became a whirling dynamo of limbs, popping out elbow, knee and leg hits almost faster than it took the foot-bag to reach them. Corey lost track of the tricks Sly was performing, but by the middle of his run it was clear he had already beaten Corey's score.

Sly's technique was the exact opposite of Corey's; all spastic, jerky motions and flailing extremities. But it worked, and the crowd quieted to a hush. Sly was breaking a sweat but his face betrayed complete calm.

With seconds left to go, Sly was clearly gearing up for a big finishing move. As the crowd watched in awed silence, Sly performed a left outside kick, over his head to a right outside kick, up to a head butt followed by a full 360 and a double knee hit, catching the bag in his ever-present hat.

He had just pulled off the legendary Squinty O'Toole, a move only whispered about in foot bag circles. Nobody in Corey's school had ever seen it performed, so unforgiving was the timing and dexterity required.

And here his old friend Sly pulled it out and made it seem easy. Sly had always been kind of a spaz, but now he had turned it into an *art form*. Corey joined in the wild applause.

When the points were tallied, Sly was first by a wide margin, and with good reason. Tiffani, whose years of dance taught her to be particularly graceful, came in second. Corey came in third, which was

respectable, but he couldn't help but think of the Greatfather's story and wonder how Krash would have handled third place or how that evil witch—Medusa? Methuselah?—would have rained her vengeance down upon anything less than a perfect win.

As if on cue, a chilly wind blew in off the bay, sending a shiver down Corey's spine. Deciding he'd had enough of prophecies and spastic dances and endangered seagulls and spectacular views for one day, he weaved through the dispersing crowd to collect his father and head back to the hotel.

* * *

Sly, Uncle Z, Corey, and Dad were in a festive mood, and after freshening up at the Holiday Inn they went out to paint the town red. Dad even loosened up a bit after downing a questionable potion concocted for him and Z at a dingy Chinatown dive, and he made it his personal quest to make sure the boys consumed every sort of dessert available to them in celebration of Sly's win.

They had ice cream in North Beach, chocolates off Market street, pie at the Fog City Diner on the Embarcadero, and finished the night off with cotton candy at Fisherman's Wharf. What's more, Corey was pretty sure Z and his dad went for a few more rounds of magic potions after dropping the boys off at the hotel to watch *Saturday Night Live* and bounce off the walls.

Both of the boys were feeling a little south of ship-shape the next day. Still, Corey had gained a little perspective on his father after seeing his more relaxed, man-on-a-frivolous-mission side the night before. There was a real spark in his eye, and for once it had nothing to do with him discussing mergers and bottom lines over the phone.

Finally back on the 5 after dealing with the snarl of San Fran/Oakland traffic, his dad kept one hand on the wheel and rubbed his temples with the other. "I think I left my head in San Francisco," he groaned.

Corey smirked. "Tell me about it. You and Z didn't get back until after midnight. Bet that elixir you drank doesn't feel so magic anymore, huh?"

His father let out an affirmative grunt.

"Speaking of magic, did you catch what Sly was up to before the event yesterday? It was like a rain dance without any water, but whatever it was, it worked. I've never seen someone foot bag like that!"

"Yeah, your uncle's been reading more and more about those

Chumash Indians. You got him all worked up about it. Seems they had all sorts of exercises to focus and improve coordination, stuff they've been doing for thousands of years before a big battle or competition. Kind of like prehistoric yoga, I guess."

Hair rose on the back of Corey's neck.

"Anyway, he said he showed Sly a few basic moves and that he really got in to it. The kid's a natural, apparently. Ten minutes of training and he was able to put it to *very* good use. Z says that sort of quick study is pretty rare without a stone to help direct your energy."

His dad gave him a quick sideways glance.

Corey gaped in speechless surprise while his dad went on.

"Yeah, Corey. I've been there. The dream, the prophecy, the Greatfather, the whole deal. Y'know, I was a pretty fair athlete when I was your age. Made it all the way to the 1957 Junior Olympics in Pasadena. A few weeks before the competition, I found a strange rock while strolling along the beach and kept it as a lucky charm. From that point on I couldn't lose a game of basketball or a foot race if I tried. And then I had a dream, probably pretty similar to what one you've had, which is when things got even weirder."

It took Corey another minute to speak. He was still trying to wrap his head around this. His dad knew? And it happened to him? Of course! If Corey had Chumash blood, then his dad did too... "But, but, how come I've never heard anyone talk about this? Mom, or grandpa, or even Uncle Z? He's like an encyclopedia of crazy stories!"

"I've never told anyone because of what happened in Pasadena. It was the final event of the Junior Olympics: the pole vault. I had done pretty good so far, but after having another dream about Medula and Paluta and Chumash legend I was going a little nuts with the pressure. I had to win the event to win the games, and all I could think about as I ran the pole down the track is what sort of crazy disaster would happen if I lost. I worried too much, wrecked my concentration and ended up knocking down the high bar. I was disqualified.

"As soon as I landed, the ground started rumbling. The organizers got everyone to safety before the earthquake got too bad. Nobody was seriously hurt, thank God, but there was over a million dollars' damage for miles around. *And* it set off a forest fire that took out a thousand of acres of Angeles National Forest."

His dad let out a long sigh.

"I lost, and I just *knew* the earthquake and forest fire were all my

fault. I never told anyone because I was too ashamed. And, besides, who was going to believe me? The story was too fantastical to be true. It was like a comic book, or one of those video games you're always playing. I talked a little bit about it with Z last night, but you're the first person I've told the whole story to, and it's only because I'm pretty sure you're going through the exact same thing."

Corey was near tears now, staring out the window at the passing hills. Too many things were racing through his mind, and he was worried if he opened his mouth he would be reduced to a puddle of nonsensical babble.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. "I hate it! Why me?! I didn't ask for all this. Why can't someone else do it? I mean, God, I'm just a kid! Why can't the stupid Chumash legend or whatever pick someone who knows what the heck they're doing?"

His dad pulled onto the shoulder and put the car in park. He then turned and placed both of his hands on Corey's shoulders. "I am really, truly sorry, bud. I didn't mean to get you so worked up. But the big point here is that you don't have to go through this alone. Your uncle Z and I are behind you 110%. Christ, I wish I could take the weight off your shoulders. But this insane prophecy's in motion again, and there's nothing left to do but see it through. I've seen you out there. *You can do this*. Don't think about disaster, don't think about ancient legend, don't think about anything but the game. Focus on yourself, and do the very best you can. That's what the Chumash stone is there for. Use it to your advantage, but remember that it all comes down to this, right here."

He laid a hand on Corey's heart.

"Believe in yourself, let it all come from here, and I promise you that nothing can stop you. Win or lose, that's what you need to remember."

Corey wiped his nose on his sleeve and let out a weak smile. His Dad gave him one last quick hug before pulling back onto the highway.

Still, he couldn't stop turning everything over in his mind. Pep talks were all well and good, but this just confirmed that if someone with Chumash blood did not win the California Games, some very bad things were going to happen. And Corey was apparently the chosen one. He tried to keep a positive attitude, but he could feel a tight ball of worry forming in the bottom of his stomach.

His father drove on. And once more, the overwhelming stench of bullcrap grew stronger by the minute as they hurtled forward. Back home—back toward the next round of the California Games.

Chapter 7

Surfing

For Sly, Z found a slightly dinged but still super solid 4 foot Town & Country Tri-Fin with a killer pink-and-yellow airbrush. Sly had taken it for a test run on the waves and reported back that it rode as smooth as it looked.

While Sly's board was undeniably cool, Corey still had the slight advantage of being Uncle Z's flesh and blood, and was bequeathed Z's own cherished board, a 5-foot needle-nose 1979 Lazer Zap with the signature star fin. This board was the pinnacle of surf design for a number of years, and a lot of the older wave jockeys still swore by it. It had been meticulously groomed, looked like a dream and rode even better. Corey could even make out the phrase "Z-Pilez" scrawled with a sharpie and obscured by years of wax. This was Uncle Z's moniker from his younger and wilder days.

Since they were both itching to put their totally sweet boards to use, and since the California Games were getting down to the wire, their parents allowed them an exceedingly rare fake-sick day. Bolstered by these surf sessions, Corey was feeling pretty good the morning of the competition and allowed himself a walk along the San Clemente shoreline with his best friend. Already feeling the competitive spirit, they had a short foot-race through the surf that ended with Sly pushing Corey into a wave before cackling and running away. Corey caught up and rewarded him with a mud-ball square in the back which Sly had to lay down in the water to clean off.

They took a breather and sat in the surf, letting their feet sink further into the wet sand with every successive wave.

"Whaddya call a yo-yo that won't stop spinning?" Sly twirled his hat on his finger while Corey racked his brain.

"I give up."

"Jake Sommers."

“Ha!”

“Heard that one in science class. I’m pretty sure Jake overheard it too, only he didn’t find it nearly as funny. I hear he’s on the warpath after what happened last weekend.”

What had happened last weekend had understandably been overshadowed by the bomb his dad dropped on the car ride home, but as he walked across the foot bag field to meet his father, he briefly found Tiffani instead. Excited by her second place finish and finding no one else in the immediate vicinity to celebrate with, she gave Corey a full-on hug before dashing off to find more of her friends.

Jake had seen everything as he emerged from the first aid tent. Jake was still a little green, but his glare was vicious enough that Corey knew he’d seen everything. If this was a movie, that would be the point where Jake pointed at Corey before raking his finger across his neck; as it was he just crammed his balled-up fists in his pockets before angrily stalking away. Corey did his best to avoid Jake all week and had so far been successful.

“Yeah... so you haven’t seen him yet today, have you?”

“Not a trace.” Sly was sticking his arms straight out and pushing them into the sand, slowly lifting until he had two long lines of sand on each arm, then vibrating his arms from the shoulder until all the sand shook off before repeating the routine. Sly noticed Corey’s quizzical look and, Sly being Sly, waited a good minute before explaining.

“Ancient Chumash balance ritual your Uncle taught me. Apparently, the more I commune with the earth or whatever the easier it is to tap in to its stability. I’m not really sure I believe in this stuff yet, but whatever I did last week, I kinda want to do it again.”

Corey hadn’t mentioned the dream or prophecy stuff to his best friend but he knew it was only a matter of time, especially with Sly now dabbling in Chumash magic. He decided to feign ignorance and tease out how much Sly knew.

“Man, Z’s really into this stuff, right? What else did he tell you? Got any tips for me?”

“Well, he says the real magic happens in the blood, so for that you have to be at least part Chumash. But apparently the rituals can work for a *gringo* like me, too. Of course, I don’t think you need much help, what with that thing around your neck.”

Corey fumbled for a response. “What, the stone? I know Uncle Z said it means something, but whatever. I just think it looks cool.”

Sly rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah? And what did the Greatfather say?”

Corey deflated with a long sigh. Apparently his friends and family had been playing a game of mystical telephone over the past week. “So you know. Sorry I wasn’t up front with you. But you gotta admit the whole situation is nuts. I mean, I’m 13 years old! I don’t want to be responsible for a disaster. What if someone gets hurt?”

Sly squinted out toward the horizon. “Yeah, dude, it’s pretty heavy. I’ll make you a deal: if it’s looking like I may come out ahead of you, I’ll take a dive. Literally. I’ll fall off my board into the water.”

“You’d throw the event for me?”

“Hey, listen, it definitely won’t be fun. I mean, I’m in it to win it like everyone else here. But it’s like you said...there’s bigger things at stake than a lousy pizza party.”

Corey didn’t know what to say. “Wow, Sly, that’s...when did you become such a good guy?” He slapped his friend on the back.

Sly stood up and grinned, brushing the sand off of his shorts. “I guess the power was within me this whole time. Now if the Hallmark moment is over with, I think we’ve got some waves to catch. You up for a long, romantic walk on the beach?”

Sly made kissy faces at Corey. Corey stood up and socked him in the arm, and they headed back toward the parking lot.

So he had friends and family who knew and supported him in this crazy prophecy thing, and a magic stone that ensured he hadn’t placed lower than third yet. He was the current point leader in the games. If he won these next two events he might just pull this whole thing off.

All in all Corey was feeling pretty good about his chances. Good, that is, until they returned to Z’s van and found their totally sweet boards had gone totally missing. Z was dozing in the passenger seat and Corey shook him awake.

“Thrilla, no...not Tiki Man. You’re boys...”

Corey and Sly exchanged a quizzical look and shook harder.

“Z, wake up! Our boards are missing!”

“*Snuh*..buh...what? I was having another one of those surfing gorilla dreams, and things really took a dark turn!”

“*Uncle Z! Our boards!*!”

Z turned around and finally noticed the glaring lack of surfboards in the back of his van. “But...how? I totally locked it before my *siesta*...”

“Z, that back lock has been busted for years. Come on!”

He dragged his uncle from the car and, together with Sly, searched high and low for their missing surfboards. They checked under picnic tables and in changing rooms. They asked around among the dozen or so surfers gathering for the competition.

It was no use; nobody had seen a trace of their precious surfboards. They sulked slowly back toward Z’s van, glumly discussing how they might pool their cash to buy a couple beat up foam boards at one of the souvenir stores off the boardwalk. Z seemed to be taking it the hardest, cursing quietly to himself and still peering in vain beneath every parked car and pile of palm fronds. Z had been a fairly hardcore surfer back in the day, and the board he gave Corey was practically a family heirloom.

Finally returning to Z’s van, all three were aghast to find the doors wide open and both of their boards in the back as if absolutely nothing had happened. Z ran up and grabbed his custom special in a bear hug, whispering, “I’ll never let you out of my sight again, I...hey, what’s this? The guide fins are gone!”

It was true: both Corey and Sly’s boards were missing the small bottom fins that assisted in balance and steering. The two friends looked at each other and said in unison: “*Jake!*”

Unfortunately, there was no time to investigate: the loudspeaker crackled to life and the announcer boomed “COMPETITORS, TAKE YOUR PLACES! THE SURFING EVENT IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!” It was no use—they would have to surf without the fins.

* * *

It was a beautiful day for surfing. The midday sun reflected brilliantly off gleaming yachts as they rocked slowly in the nearby harbor. The island of Santa Catalina and a handful of oil rigs rose majestically above a thin strip of fog that the sun had not yet burned from the horizon. And some solid waves were lazily pushing themselves toward the shore. Older surfers had been cleared from the water for the purpose of the competition, and you could hear their low grumbles as they clustered in small groups, drinking coffee and swapping stories.

Corey and Sly took in the whole scene. As luck would have it, the two friends were slated for the third-to-last and second-to-last runs, and although the small pool of competitors meant there still wasn’t any time to search for the missing fins, they were at least able to watch and size up the competition.

Each surfer laid down on their board and paddled madly with

their arms until they were about 25 feet away from shore. There they would wait for a good wave, pop up to a standing position, and ride the wave as long as they could. The longer they remained standing, and the more they “carved” by slicing their boards up and down the slope of the wave, the more points they scored.

Most of the competitors couldn’t stick it out terribly long on their chosen wave; the average ninth grader just wasn’t physically large enough to effectively weigh down the board and negotiate a wave for any great length of time.

The exception was Epyx. There was some snickering when she took to the sea with a relatively short 4-foot board, but this soon died away as she expertly negotiated the wave, slicing up and down its length, and even getting airborne for a brief moment. When the wave finally fizzled out, she remained standing on her board, smiling sheepishly as the announcer marveled and the crowd cheered.

Tiffani went next and turned in a respectable performance that nevertheless could not top Epyx. Jake was scheduled to go on last, but was still nowhere to be found. That left two more surfers: Corey and Sly, with Sly up first. Corey turned to his friend to wish him luck but found himself facing a vacated dent in the sand. He glanced around and spied Sly chatting with the announcer. They shook hands and Sly jogged back over.

“You’re up, pal!”

“But I thought you were next?”

“I wanted you to go first so I could gauge your run. I won’t be responsible for an earthquake or whatever. I told the announcer I had a *family emergency*. Nobody questions that excuse.”

“THERE HAS BEEN A SCHEDULE CHANGE! PLEAAASE WELCOME TO THE WAVES COREY PHILLIPS!”

Sly adjusted his hat and put his elbows back on the sand. “Go get ‘em, champ!”

Corey heard his dad and Uncle Z hooting and hollering from a bit further back in the sand. After paddling out a sufficient distance, he paused for a moment while straddling his board to regard the dots of humanity on the beach. They looked about as tiny and insignificant as Corey felt in the face of all this prophecy business. He knew it was up to him, but every moment that brought him closer to the end of the games made him more and more nervous. He couldn’t possibly imagine what might happen if he lost, and he couldn’t really think of anything else.

With a deep breath, Corey pushed these thoughts away and watched for a killer wave, but the surf was coming up short. Wave after wave fizzled out before getting even half way to shore. Finally he saw it: the perfect wave. It was quick and sleek and would obviously hold its crest until it just passed his position in the water. Giving it one more glance before popping up on his board, Corey thought he glimpsed the wrinkly face of an ancient, familiar man in the swirls and eddies of the wave. *I guess Greatfather's looking out for me too*, he thought.

As the wave reached him Corey pushed his chest up and threw his legs underneath. His feet hit the board with an unsteady *THWOMP* and he swayed wildly for a minute, nearly wiping out. He closed his eyes, slowly spread his arms, and let out another deep breath. His stance grew more solid, and when he opened his eyes again he was upright and riding.

Up the slope of the wave, and down. He lacked the guts and the skill to get airborne like Epyx did, so he focused on carving and remaining steady for as long as possible. By the time the wave died, Corey had ridden it dozens of feet further than any other competitor.

He fell gently backwards into the water and waded ashore to a smattering of applause. His run was not spectacular, but it was solid and particularly long, which the judges appreciated. He scored an 8.3, second only to Epyx in the rankings.

Dad was particularly excited. "Great stuff, buddy! I checked with the judges and even if Sly or that Epic girl win this round, you're still the point leader. I think you're on track to win the whole burrito!"

His father was trying to sound as upbeat as possible, but the awkward attempt at slang betrayed his nervousness.

"Thanks dad, but her name is Epyx. And I'm pretty sure you meant 'the whole enchilada.'"

Z piped in. "Great run, little dude. Seeing you out on my old board brought back a lot of memories. Well, at least a couple memories... I, uh, partied pretty hard back then..."

As they spoke, Sly headed out into the waves.

Corey shifted toward Z in his beach chair and narrowed his eyes in mock annoyance. "I hear you've been telling him a thing or two as well. Maybe something about a certain dream and a certain Indian shaman?"

Corey's dad was aghast. "Zukie, no! You didn't!"

Uncle Z smiled sheepishly. "I did. I got excited and let it slip. I swear I didn't even think Sly would believe me but...well, things have been pretty strange the last couple of weeks."

Corey shook his head. "It's alright, Uncle Z. Sly's totally on board with this. He even offered to throw his run if it looked like he was gonna beat me...though I don't think that's going to be a problem."

They all looked out to see Sly awkwardly attempting to climb on his wobbly board before crashing backward into the waves. The run didn't count until you started successfully riding a wave, but these false starts did not bode well.

Finally he caught a wave and got up on the board, beaming triumphantly while holding his arms out for balance. He tried a few slight turns but mostly seemed to focus on staying upright.

Z clapped his hands. "Say, he's not doing too bad. Even with the missing fin! And look, a dolphin! That has to be a good sign, right?"

Corey's dad squinted out to sea. "That's odd...dolphins don't usually come this close to shore. I wonder what...*oh no!*" His dad and Uncle Z sprang up and ran toward the announcer. Within seconds, the loudspeaker boomed to life.

"EVERYONE OUT OF THE WATER! THERE'S A SHARK IN THE WATER! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! THE AUTHORITIES ARE ON THE WAY!"

Sly had not noticed anything until he heard the announcer, but as he turned and saw the shark fin circling him his face went white.

He tried desperately to stay upright on increasingly wobbly legs, but it was no use; Sly and the beast were on course for a direct collision. Corey covered his eyes in despair and turned away as the frothing surf and teeming, terrified crowd obscured his vision.

Just then he heard a *THWUNK*, followed by an "Ow! What?!? You...*you!*"

Corey had never witnessed a shark attack, but was pretty sure they were accompanied by panicked screams, not shouts of confusion.

He ran to the edge of the surf to find Sly wading ashore with a look of fury. In one hand he grasped his board, while in the other he held Jake Sommers, half-obscured by a homemade shark costume that didn't look nearly as realistic close up. In fact, it featured some *very* familiar fins. Jake was near tears as Sly threw him sprawling to the sand.

"*I thought I was gonna die!* I didn't know what to do but I remembered from the Discovery Channel that you're supposed to punch a shark in the nose if it's after you...so I aimed my board straight for his nose. Next thing I know, I'm floating dazed in the surf, and *this jackass* is right next to me!"

Jake bawled. “*I’m sorry!* I didn’t mean anything! I was just mad at Corey and wanted to scare him a little, ow, so I took the fins off your boards and made this stupid costume to mess up his run! But I didn’t know you switched and ow, anyway I didn’t think anyone would be fooled and ow I’m sorry, and *ow* I think my arm is broken!”

Jake’s arm did look pretty heavily bruised. Once more he limped away to the First Aid tent, this time with the assistance of a lifeguard. Uncle Z, Sly and Epyx were all patting the still furious Sly on the back, trying to calm him down. The crowd spread out a bit as the loudspeaker once more crackled to life.

“FALSE ALARM, FOLKS! JUST A PRACTICAL JOKE FROM ONE OF OUR CONTESTANTS! NEVER YOU FEAR, THE ORGANIZERS WILL DECIDE ON AN APPROPRIATE DISCIPLINARY ACTION! BUT NOW, FOR THE SCORES: THIRD PLACE IS TIFFANI SMITH! TIED FOR SECOND, COREY PHILLIPS AND SLY WINKLE, WHO BRAVELY OVERCAME THIS UNEXPECTED OBSTACLE! AND IN FIRST PLACE, uhhh... EMILIA XOCHO... XOCHA... XOCALO... EPYX! WITH A SCORE OF 9.0!”

Everyone cheered for Epyx, who waved meekly. Corey pried the fins from the shark costume and turned to his uncle.

“Do you think you can re-attach these to our boards?”

“It’s the least I can do, C-Monster. Man, this whole situation is crazy! What was that Jake kid doing?”

Corey found himself thinking back to the last few times he had seen Jake, and the desperate-to-please look in his eyes whenever he removed his too-cool shades.

“Who knows, Uncle Z. Things have been a little crazy for everyone. I think the whole situation just got out of hand.”

“You’re probably right, little man. Things spiral out of control when everyone starts getting worked up. That’s human nature. Even the Chumash seemed to know that!”

They walked in silence for a moment before Uncle Z cracked a small grin.

“Who knows? Maybe there’s...*something in the water!*”

Z cackled, his dad chuckled, Corey groaned and Sly punched Z in the arm. After all, they were relieved that everybody was okay, and they were grateful for a distraction from the weight of the prophecy.

Corey's dad suggested Slurpees, and everyone agreed as they threw their gear in Z's van, piled in, and drove away.

Chapter 8

Pause

Corey was sprawled across the couch at home, his eyes fixed lazily on the T.V. screen. It was nearing midnight and everyone else was already in bed, but Corey felt he still had some unwinding to do after the events of that afternoon. Besides, as the final event of the California Games loomed ever closer, Corey was finding it harder and harder to fall asleep.

The T.V. was tuned to the local news on mute, and when an image of San Clemente Beach and the words “California Games” flashed onto the screen, Corey scrambled for the remote. By the time he turned up the volume, they were already half-way through the story.

“...student Jake Sommers was found to be the one behind the shark attack prank that briefly cleared the beach this Saturday. The teen suffered a dislocated shoulder that paramedics were quickly able to set, and he was released from the hospital earlier tonight. Due to his injury the event organizers have declined to press charges, but Jake has been banned from further competition in the California Games.”

Corey felt a little weird that something he was directly involved with had caused a local news sensation and ended Jake’s chances at winning the California Games. Still, he had brought it upon himself. Maybe the consequences of his action, and all the media attention they drew, would take Jake down a peg.

“...and in entertainment news, scandal erupted after *L.A. Times* investigative reporter Chuck Phillips revealed that popular recording artists Milli Vanilli did not actually sing any of the vocal tracks on their hit records and were in fact lip syncing at all live performances, including their recent Grammy win. After public outcry the disgraced duo will be forced to return their Grammy awards...”

Huh. Not only did Milli Vanilli not write their songs, they didn’t even sing them. But aside from wondering what the California Games

were going to do without their grand-prize headliner, Corey couldn't bring himself to care too much about the fate of a couple guys in dreadlocks and grandpa glasses.

Every time a story like this broke, it seemed to say to the world that it's okay to cheat as long as you win. This made Corey wonder what he was really doing with the magic Chumash stone still suspended around his neck. In a certain sense, the stone chose *him*—but what would the California Games' organizers do if they found out Corey was using a performance-enhancing mineral? Cheating to save the world was still, well, cheating.

Thinking on this weird little paradox made Corey's head hurt, and he shut his eyes and rubbed his temples. He really needed to get some sleep. He blinked drowsily and shifted his position on the couch. *At this rate, Corey thought, it'll take me hours to get to...*

* * *

Once more he found himself upon the windy, forest-encircled hill. He knew instantly that he was dreaming, and he was not too surprised to discover a familiar bright pink disc on the ground before him. What had changed, however, was the phrase: the bright yellow block letters on the disc now read LOSE TO WIN. It was a more direct version of the riddle posed by the Greatfather that he had been puzzling over.

Corey was distracted by a bright flash of movement at the bottom of the hill. He craned his neck to see who or what was down there and could not believe his eyes: it was his dad and Uncle Z, decked out in the same neon suits and combat boots favored by Milli Vanilli. The words they called to him were faint, but they sounded like, *Throw the disc! Win the games! Throw the disc! Win the games!*

He heard a chuckle behind him and spun around to find Sly, Tiffani and Epyx standing in a loose semi-circle.

"10-to-1 those outfits were Z's idea," Sly whispered out of the corner of his mouth, earning a swift jab to the ribs from Epyx.

A fierce and sudden gale whipped Corey's attention to the sky to once again, where he found a tornado bearing down on the exposed hill-top.

Corey again peered down the hill, where his dad and uncle were doing a barely-passable version of some Milli Vanilli moves and yelling *Throw the disc! Win the games! That is all that matters!*

Corey glanced quickly around at his now hysterical friends. What could he do? If he threw the disc down the hill, he would win the games

at the cost of losing his friends. If he tried to save his friends, he would lose the games—and subsequently much, much more. He looked down at the LOSE TO WIN disc in his hand, which as he stared transformed into a giant-sized version of his mystical Chumash stone.

Suddenly, Corey knew what he had to do. He grasped the stone with two hands and yelled “Everyone grab on!”

All three of his friends clutched the ring he was holding as the tornado lifted their bodies into the air. Corey dug his feet into the ground and miraculously remained anchored as the storm swirled all around them. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, just waiting for it all to be over.

* * *

And just like that, it was. Corey jolted awake to a dim sea of static on the T.V. The white noise reminded him of a fearsome storm heard from a great distance.

The clock atop the television told Corey that he had achieved at least a few hours of sleep. He was blearily attempting to rise from the couch and stumble to his bedroom when he finally noticed what was in his hands: a brand new, bright pink flying disk. The he words YOU PASSED THE TEST were printed on the front.

Corey rubbed his eyes and looked again. Now the disc simply read SPINJAMMER in a circle. Things had been so weird as of late that Corey took this optical illusion in stride. He was more focused on his dream.

What did it mean? What test had he passed? He saved his friends, but did he lose the game? And when it came down to the final event next weekend, would Corey have to choose between his friends’ well-being and the safety of countless others?

He climbed the stairs toward the bedroom, still regarding the bright disc in his hands. At least one thing was certain: if he was going to have any chance of winning these California Games, he had a lot of practicing to do.

Chapter 9

Flying Disk

This was it. The final day of the California Games.

For the conclusion of the tournament, the organizers chose a suitably epic spot: a hill-top glade looking down over Temecula, an old cow town turned wine country nestled in a valley between the Santa Ana and San Jacinto mountain ranges. From the official flying disk field, you could see the vineyards and cow pastures receding into the hazy sunshine of the late morning, and even catch a shining glimpse of Lake Elsinore in the distance.

Only 10 competitors remained, and they were all here hours before the event, stretching and practicing. Corey, Sly and Tiffani led the scores, but a spectacular run on the flying disk field could clinch the win for anyone. The stakes, and therefore the pressure, ran undeniably high.

Corey was trying, and mostly failing, to disregard this pressure as he tossed a disk around with Epyx. From the stiffness of her throw and the knit in her brow, it looked like Epyx was feeling much the same way.

She lunged for a catch, then straightened up to fix her ponytail. “Ugh, my stomach is in knots. And I’ve started catching disks in my dreams. Y’know, after today, I think I’d be perfectly okay if I never see another Spin Jammer again.” She flicked the disk in his direction.

Corey leapt to catch it, then let out a strained laugh. “Tell me about it! I’ve been throwing so much I feel like my fingers are going to fall off!”

“You wanna take a break, then?”

They sat together, cross-legged in the grass. Also trying to feign cool, calm and collected, Epyx tore a little too casually at a patch of grass for a minute before speaking.

“It’s nothing compared to Sly. I swear, ever since he picked up that Native American yoga thing he’s been practicing like a mad man. A

few nights ago we threw a disk until I was ready to collapse; after that he just started throwing it to himself, straight up in the air. And he'll practice when nobody is watching, without telling anyone where he is. For the first time, he doesn't seem to be trying to impress anyone. It's almost like he's just doing it for himself."

Now that he thought about it, Corey had seen very little of Sly over the last few weeks. His friend, who knew all about his secret quest and had even offered to stack the deck in Corey's favor, had been quietly working through his own issues. The more he thought about it the worse he felt, and he decided to let Sly know how much his support meant, and talk through whatever had been going on with him. Maybe over sugary sodas and late night Nintendo. Such a fun, care-free night seemed so far away.

He realized he had been lost in thought and apologized to Epyx, who laughed genuinely. "No worries. I think we're all a little spacey right now. Isn't it crazy, how we've made it all the way to the end? What kind of luck is that? If this was a movie or something, this would be just about the time when something really great or really terrible happens."

She stood up and brushed the grass from her legs.

"Let's hope for the former. Anyway, time to face the music."

As if on cue, a cloud passed over the sun and the wind kicked up a few notches. Epyx shielded her eyes and stared off into the distance. "Huh. The weather didn't say anything about clouds today." She shrugged and headed back toward the parking lot, where the other competitors were clutching their disks and doing their best to remain nonchalant in the face of the competition's final hour.

* * *

Being the point leaders, Corey and Sly were once more scheduled to go last. This did nothing to help Corey's feeling of impending doom. Also not helping matters were the strained smiles of Uncle Z and his dad. Z clapped and laughed just a bit too loudly at nearly everything he heard, and Dad's practiced, careless grin did not match his increasingly vice-like grip on Corey's shoulder. Corey put both of his hands over the Chumash stone and focused on breathing normally.

In the flying disk event, competitors were to play in pairs for a set period of time, and points were gained either by the thrower (for a successful toss over 20 yards) or by the catcher (for a diving, overhead or behind-the-back catch). Since every yard over 20 translates to more points, the competitors toss the disk on a field with roughly the same markings of a football field. The length and "catch-ability" of a toss

depended on both the speed and angle at which the flying disk is thrown.

Unfortunately, the third variable in disk toss quality was the weather.

The games got underway, and the announcer belted out throw distances at his customary volume, but none of the throws really merited his enthusiastic screams. The flying disks veered wildly in the wind as the competitors scrambled valiantly around the field, trying to guess where each would come down, and mostly coming up short.

The two glaring exceptions in this parade of fumbles were Tiffani and Epyx, who completed an absolutely amazing set in spite of the winds. Maybe it was due to Tiffani's training as a gymnast and dancer, or perhaps it was Epyx's boundless energy and impressive throwing arm. Whatever the reason, the duo positively danced across the playing field, flicking and catching the disk with an easy yet precise grace. They'd obviously spent plenty of time practicing together. Then again, so had every other pair of competitors, and it hadn't seemed to do them nearly as much good.

By the end of their run they had racked up a ridiculous number of catches and several heart-stoppingly long throws. So long, in fact, that the announcer conferred with the organizers for a moment before ecstatically crying out: "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, HOLD ON TO YOUR WINDSOCKS! DESPITE THIS ADVERSE WEATHER, TIFFANI AND EPYX HAVE DONE THE IMPOSSIBLE AND LAUNCHED THEIR FLYING DISK A JAW-DROPPING 83 YARDS! IT'S A NEW CALIFORNIA GAMES RECORD! AAAMAZING!"

The two girls trotted off the field, grinning, panting and graciously accepting the high-fives offered up to them.

Corey and Sly were sitting together on the sidelines. Though they didn't know it, Tiffani and Epyx may have just spelled disaster for everybody.

The wind continued to slowly build, and several menacing-looking clouds muscled their way in to an otherwise blue sky. "And to think I thought that they would need *my* help," Corey grumbled under his breath.

Sly cocked an eyebrow. "What was that?"

"Uh, nothing. Just a dumb dream I had last week."

Sly looked a little thunderstruck and spoke slowly. "Let me guess. Bright pink Spinjammer turned to stone. Your dad and uncle dressed ridiculously and hollering for the disk. And those two, along with myself, about to be sucked into a vicious vortex."

Now it was Corey's turn to look aghast.

"Dude, *I had the same dream*. 'Cept in my version I was the one with the Chumash stone who saved the day. Naturally."

Corey was thankful that another pair of competitors was currently flailing around on the field, as it gave him time to process this insane information.

And then it hit him. Sly had been practicing harder than anyone. He'd been the first to arrive at every event and the last to leave, despite a total lack of parental support. He wanted to prove to everyone, to anyone, that he was more than a goofball in a silly old hat. And yet Sly watched as his best friend took nearly all of the glory, attempting all the while to keep an easy smile on his face.

Corey knew the stakes of this event—they both did—but it didn't feel right. No matter how many points he scored, Corey knew it still wouldn't feel like winning.

And, just like that, Corey knew how to win. As the clouds mounted and the wind ripped through the trees and the announcer roared their names over the loudspeaker, he slipped the Chumash stone from around his neck and handed it to the Sly.

"Wait, what are you doing?! What about the prophecy? Why would you give this to me? I mean, why now?"

Corey knew exactly why but could not quite put it into words. He hoped what words he did find sounded more confident as he spoke them: "Because I *found* this, Sly. *You* earned it."

Sly had more to say, but there wasn't any time. They were up. Corey gripped his hot pink Spin Jammer like the ridiculous tool of destiny that it was and followed Sly out on to the field.

He knew that for Sly to win, they just had to beat Tiffani and Epyx. But beating a record-breaking run was a tall order even with ancient Indian magic, and Corey had just given himself a significant handicap.

Or so he thought: despite the gale-force winds that cause the assembled crowd to quickly turn up their collars and screw their fists deeper into their pockets, the Spin Jammer flew straight as an arrow from Corey's first toss to Sly's overhead catch. And again on the return flight. And again. And again. If Corey and Sly could hear the murmur of the crowd over the cacophony, they'd know that they weren't the only ones suspecting magic at work. There was simply no other explanation for the sublime speed and superior angle at which the flying disk traveled from hand to hand.

The Spin Jammer was a mystical magnet and each deft catch and energetic toss seemed to re-energize it. If Corey found himself performing better than he expected, Sly with the Chumash stone was like some benevolent disk-flinging god. A slow clap among the audience grew to a roar that nearly matched the weather. The only problem was, despite their improbably great run, they were still neck and neck with the girls.

As the clock wound down and the storm kept winding up, Sly gave Corey a nod that spoke volumes. Corey spun on his heels and ran all the way across the field. When he passed the end of the field markings, he turned again just in time to see Sly's throw. It was an absolute thing of beauty, carried aloft by the very winds that had struck nearly every other disk down, delivered in a perfectly parabolic arc straight to Corey. In agonizingly slow motion, he watched the Spin Jammer descend toward him. His own arm stretched out, his fingers caught, and his arms cradled this disk of destiny close to his heart.

The crowd erupted; the loudspeaker exploded. 124 yards. Together, these two best friends had just won the California Games.

Chapter 10

Done

It was the following Friday on a perfectly sunny Southern California afternoon and people were still talking about the winning throw. Kids clustered around Sly and Corey on the blacktop behind their school, peppering them with questions about the legendary toss.

How did you know exactly where to stand? A shrug. “Practice, I guess.” *What are you gonna do with the Spin Jammer?* Sly fielded this one: “That disk has earned itself a well deserved retirement. For now, it has an honored spot on my bookshelf. Maybe one day I’ll mount it!” *Did you know that a tornado touched down, like, 30 miles from Temecula during the event?* Corey and Sly had only found out about this after the fact. But the tornado had dissipated as soon as it appeared, just as Corey caught the final disk toss. To those who made the connection it seemed an eerie coincidence; only Corey, Sly, Dad and Uncle Z knew the truth. Which brought them to the most asked question by far: *How did you do it?*

This was a more complicated answer, and one which the boys were not so willing to give up. When pressed, Sly simply smiled and spread his hands, stating, “Yeah, I know. Nobody knows, where it comes...and where it goes.” This left most people confused enough, and/or frustrated enough, to stop asking.

As promised, the organizers of the California Games threw a school-wide pizza party and invited not only every student but the families of everyone who competed. Corey’s mom was busy with her usual meeting and greeting, and his dad looked ecstatic just to be standing there in one piece. Tiffani’s mom was quite obviously scanning the crowd for the delinquent that had broken the screen door of her beautiful beach house. Epyx’s dad had a big, kind-hearted belly laugh and cracked jokes with every person he met; Corey could see where she got her forceful personality. Jake arrived with his disapproving parents in tow, missing his million dollar smile and wearing a new-ish arm cast that no one had yet

signed. Of course Uncle Z was there, wearing his bright green SKATE OR DIE hat and stuffing his face with free grub. Even Sly's parents showed up, looking justifiably proud but also sheepishly aware that their son had won a competition for which they hadn't attended a single event.

And then he saw Milli Vanilli, as promised. Their scandal had broken weeks ago, but the contracts had already been signed.

So here they were, two glum looking German dudes sitting in the corner of the outdoor basketball court and sharing their sob story in broken English with anyone who got too close. The fact that their biggest hit was playing in constant loop on speakers behind them must have made it a very special kind of hell for the disgraced duo.

This odd spectacle captured Corey's attention only briefly before a shadow passing over the ground accompanied by the sudden cry of a hawk drew his gaze upward. Momentarily blinded by the sun, Corey blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes. When he regained his vision, the entire schoolyard was quiet and empty save for a single old man standing in front of him. Greatfather raised his hand in greeting.

Corey was shaken and more than a little annoyed. "Again? I thought I was done with all this stuff! I mean, we won the Games! We beat the crap out of that tornado!"

Greatfather smiled. "Peace, Corey. This will be the last of your visions. From this day forward you will be a wholly normal young man, for the better or for the worse."

He motioned to Corey and they began walking side by side.

"You also speak the truth about the Games. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and disaster averted. A descendant of the first people has proven himself on the playing field, and banished the dark powers of Medula once more."

Corey stopped walking. "Yeah, about...Medula...and all that. I thought my Chumash blood was the key to all this. And in case you hadn't noticed, Sly kinda-sorta won the Games. I mean, I came in third, behind Tiffani. I was beaten by a *girl*!"

Greatfather nodded slowly. "Ah, but Corey Phillips, your friend is not exactly who he seems!"

The old man snapped his fingers and Sly Winkle appeared a dozen yards in front of them, along with Uncle Z. His uncle appeared to be teaching Sly some basic mime maneuvers such as the invisible rope and the invisible box, as well as more advanced stuff like the invisible canoe and taming an invisible lion.

“The man you see in front of you is quite obviously your uncle, and a descendant of the first people. However, your friend Sly also has the Chumash blood in his veins. Indeed, he is Zukie’s son, and thus your blood as well.”

He watched Sly and Z mimic each other’s subtle hand movements, and was amazed that he had not seen it sooner: The same goofy grin, same eager-to-please energy, same fashion sense that could charitably be described as unique.

“In his younger days, your uncle Zukie was involved with a fiery, artistic woman while living in the beaches of Venice. The flame of their love burned quickly, as young love must, and before he realized the shape of things he was left with a newborn son and a vanished mother. Without even a stable roof under which to raise the boy, Zukie had no choice but to give him up.

“I understand this is a shock, but you must not speak a word to your uncle, or the boy who is now your cousin. They do not yet know their relationship, though they will discover it soon enough. Just know that everything has proceeded according to destiny. You have faced a great challenge, and you have passed.”

Corey took a moment to process this information. “So, what you’re saying is...there was a *back-up plan*?!”

Greatfather smiled once more. “We cannot pretend to understand the plan of the Gods, young one. We may only trust that their plans may see us through with little pain, and a great abundance of joy. Speaking of which, I believe you have a celebration to return to. Do not let me keep you, Corey Phillips.”

And with a flash, Greatfather was gone, replaced once more with the freewheeling pizza party. There had been so much strangeness over the past six weeks, but Corey found himself at peace with what had transpired. It seemed that life was eternally shuffling the deck, and no matter how odd the hand it dealt you each day (or month, or year), there wasn’t much choice but to play.

If this was considered losing, Corey was okay with it. It felt good to stand here in the sunshine, surrounded by friends and laughter. It felt good, and weird, and wonderful, and, best of all, it felt kind of normal.

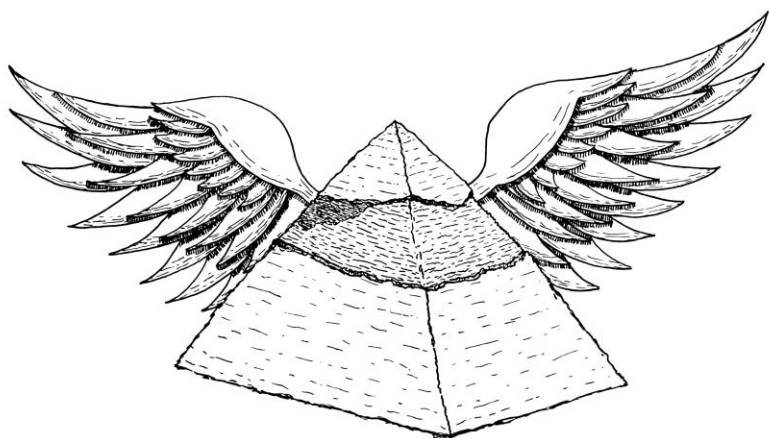
He watched Uncle Z strike up a fractured conversation with Milli Vanilli, and after a little encouragement got them to teach him some of their dance moves. He watched as his father and mother joined in, wearing quiet smiles. He saw Sly moving to the looped music, holding an imaginary fishing rod and casting his imaginary line toward Epyx, who

grinned and shuffled her way towards him.

And, finally, he saw Tiffani across the black top, who saw him and waved.

Corey put a hand in his pocket to touch a familiar, reassuring stone. Then he took a deep breath and began walking toward her.

Game on.



LEGENDARY WINGS

by Guy Vollen

For R. A. Montgomery

WARNING!

This is not an ordinary book! Do not simply start at the beginning and read straight through. *You* are the hero of this book, and *you* decide how the story unfolds! This is a book you can *play*, not unlike your favorite Nintendo Entertainment System™ game programs!

To begin, read Section 1. When prompted, make a choice and turn to the section indicated. But be careful! Your choices have consequences. There are more than a dozen unique endings. In this book you will explore a fantastic future or legendary past, fight terrifying monsters, find true love, or you may even be turned into a bat!

DOUBLE WARNING!

This is not just a story with branching pathways! It is a test of luck and skill, just like the many popular and exciting game programs available for the Nintendo Entertainment System™! The world of *Legendary Wings* is dangerous, and you may be called upon to fight for your life. The innovative combat system is easy to learn and use, but you must be prepared: in addition to this book, you will need a pencil, scratch paper, a six-sided die, and a small token such as a coin, game piece, or acorn. In addition, peel some grapes and cook some spaghetti (ask your parents for help with this), and set them aside. Then you're ready to get in the game!

1.

It's an ordinary day in school when Mr. Packard announces that a special guest will be speaking to your history class. He introduces Dr. LeCygne from the local university.

"Good afternoon, class," he says. "I'm very pleased to be here with you, and I've brought some artifacts from my study at the university. Can anyone tell me what these are?" He unveils a tray of small stone sculptures, some broken and cracked, others whole. They resemble human figures with rounded features, engraved with hieroglyphics. The largest has large angelic wings and a heart in the middle of its chest.

You recognize them instantly and raise your hand. "These are from the mysterious, ancient culture of the Aresians. They've been found all over the world in connection with Greek, Indian, and Egyptian archeological sites."

You've been reading about the Aresians a lot lately. A big kid named Terry snorts at you; your bookishness has drawn unwelcome attention from school bullies, of which Terry is the most persistent. Neither Mr. Packard nor Dr. LeCygne take notice of Terry.

"That's correct!" LeCygne says. "I've devoted my life to the study of the Aresians, and I believe I've finally deciphered the meaning of their strange inscriptions. If my translations are correct, the Aresians were a worldwide culture with incredibly advanced technology. They gave control of their society to something they called 'Dark,' seemingly an artificial brain of some kind."

"Like a computer?" you say.

"Yes, exactly," LeCygne confirms. Terry glowers at you. "Dark either failed, or was corrupted, and their society collapsed. A terrible battle destroyed almost all record of the Aresians, but they left their mark on the ancient cultures that followed them."

"Like Atlantis!" you exclaim. Terry stares at you and breaks a pencil in half meaningfully.

"Yes, something like the legend of Atlantis. Perhaps this was the basis for that story."

Wow! This is even more exciting than what you've read about the Aresians so far.

"You seem very interested in this subject," Dr. LeCygne says to you after class. "If you're free this afternoon, I'd like to invite you to the

university to see my work. I have several much larger statues there. What do you say?”

If you agree to visit Dr. LeCygne at the university, go to Section 7.

If you decline, go to Section 11.

2.

“Much of what has been said about the Aresians and their empire is true,” Dr. LeCygne begins, “and clearly you have figured out much for yourself. But what I must tell you is that the devastating war against Dark is *not in the past*. For me, it is still raging, but in another time from which I have briefly been able to escape...in order to seek help.”

You’re still confused. LeCygne shakes his head. “It’s not important. But that’s why we need you: to end the war *before it invades your time*. Your world. Do you see?” LeCygne is agitated; he rushes about, moving papers and objects around, throwing levers on his complicated machines. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet who will make things clearer for you.”

Suddenly there is an intense glow in the middle of the room, and a tall, muscular man is standing where there was nothing a moment before. He’s wearing red trunks and boots like a wrestler, but what gets your attention are the golden wings, like an eagle’s, sprouting from his back.

“We have found our champion,” LeCygne tells the strange visitor. The winged man breaks into a smile. “Ares be praised,” he says, and introduces himself. “You may call me...”

Go to Section 6.

3.

Just before Terry can start playing, there is a knock at the door. “Aw, man.” Terry pauses the game and gets the door. It’s an older kid whom you’ve seen hanging around the parking lot of the school a few times; he even has a scraggly mustache. “You know Kevin?” Terry says.

You tell Kevin your name and he says, “Hey,” to you before turning to Terry. “Listen, something’s up. You gotta come with me to the creek. There’s a...” Kevin looks at you doubtfully.

“It’s okay,” Terry vouches for you. “This kid’s cool.”

“Okay,” Kevin says. “You wanna see a dead body?”

If you wanna see a dead body, go to Section 17.

If you don’t wanna see a dead body, go to Section 9.

If your name is also Kevin, go to Section 60.

4.

After a short wait in his office, Dr. LeCygne returns with the test results. “I haven’t been entirely honest with you,” he says. “The truth is, I am an emissary of the Aresians, sent through time to find the champion who will lead us into victory against Dark. Your blood tests confirm it: *you* are that champion!”

“What?” you sputter. “That’s crazy!”

“Not at all,” LeCygne says. “You observed the similarity of the Aresian engravings to circuit diagrams. You saw for yourself the statue’s reaction to your touch. There can only be one meaning for this, and the tests confirm it: you are the one. Please, listen while I tell you more about the Aresians and their destiny. *Your* destiny.”

If you agree to hear more, go to Section 2.

If you leave as quickly as possible, go to Section 13.

5.

Terry lives in a small apartment a few blocks from school. No one is home when the two of you arrive. “My parents are at work,” Terry says. “It’s just the two of us.”

You’re a little nervous being alone together, but Terry turns on the TV and pulls out a Nintendo Entertainment System™, just like the one Fred Savage plays in the hit motion picture *The Wizard*. You feel more at ease already. Terry plugs a cartridge into the console.

“You ever played *Legendary Wings*?”

If you say yes, go to Section 8.

If you say no, go to Section 12.

6.

“...Kevin.”

The winged man radiates strength and calm. He’s so charismatic, in fact, that when you speak to him it’s as if there is no one else there; it’s just the two of you.

“Kevin?” you say. Kevin nods. It’s not the name you would have expected for a legendary warrior, but it fits him. “Are those real?” you ask, indicating his wings. “Were you born like that?”

Kevin laughs. “Yes, and no. These were given to me by King Ares in order to fight our enemy. As champion, he can give you a pair as well.”

Wow! It sounds too good to be true, but there stands Kevin, with a pair of real wings.

“Would you like to meet him?” Kevin asks. “I know King Ares has been expecting you.”

He steps forward and envelops you in his wings; the next moment you are hurtling through space. Or is it time?

To meet King Ares, go to Section 23.

If you need more proof, go to Section 29.

7.

Dr. LeCygne's study at the university is almost as big as a warehouse, full of statues in various conditions. All of them have the unique engravings of the Aresians on all or part of their surface. "They look almost like circuit diagrams!" you point out.

"Yes, I've thought so too, but they have no connection to electrical engineering that I can detect," LeCygne says. Other stone fragments line wooden shelves. Boxes of files and strange electronic equipment fill one end of the room. "This is the most interesting artifact I'm working with right now," Dr. LeCygne explains as he shows you an enormous stone head. Its blank eyes appear wide open, and its mouth is a perfect circle, as if making the "O" sound. Its chubby cheeks give it the appearance of a giant stone baby. Something about it looks eerily familiar. It's almost as if it were alive, as if it were...waiting.

Before you realize what's happening, you reach out to touch the cold stone. "Wait, I must ask you not to touch, these are extremely fragile relics..."

You hear Dr. LeCygne's voice, but it's too late. As soon as you touch the statue, a flash of recognition passes through you: you see a lopsided battle between high-tech laser-toting robots and unarmed farmers. Is it the past you see, or the future? At the same time, the statue disappears, replaced by the metallic, skull-like visage of a robot! As quickly as the vision comes, it is gone; the statue is cold stone once again.

Dr. LeCygne is incredulous. "That's never happened before!" he exclaims. He is suddenly excited. "There must be something about you," he theorizes, "some connection to the Aresians that awoke something in the statue. What do you know of your ancestry?" You shake your head; you'd never even heard of the Aresians until you started reading about them in the last year. "It's been theorized that memories can be encoded into a person's genetic structure, and then passed on to the next generation. Would you be comfortable allowing me to draw some of your blood, for analysis?"

If you allow Dr. LeCygne to draw your blood, go to Section 4.

If you decline, go to Section 18.

8.

Yes, *Legendary Wings* is one of your favorites!

“So, whaddya want, a medal?” Terry says, put out, but inserts the game into the console anyway.

There don’t seem to be any other cartridges around.

Go to Section 14.

9.

No, you’d rather not. “Aw, c’mon, jeez,” Terry says, but your mind is made up. “Pfft, you probably couldn’t handle it anyway,” Terry snorts. “Later, dingleberry.”

You walk home silently; you pick at your dinner indifferently. Later, you open your schoolbooks to work on your homework. For some reason the Aresians just don’t hold your interest like they did before. When your parents ask you what’s wrong, you don’t really know what to tell them. Nothing is wrong.

You never study the Aresians again, but sometimes you occasionally look back at today. It won’t be until years later that you remember how hurt Terry looked by your refusal, and you’ll wonder if you did the right thing. But it will be much, much too late.

THE END

10.

You finally have your wings; you feel the liberation of flight. But you didn’t know you’d be so small. “What is going on?” you ask, but the only sound that comes out is a hypersonic squeak. The darkness of the cave doesn’t bother you. Your eyesight is so keen it seems like daylight.

But you’re hungry. So hungry. Insects flit by you. Flit! Flit! You gobble them up. But it’s not enough.

Blood. You hunger for rich, red blood. Your mouth waters at the thought; your lips curl over your tiny fangs.

Once darkness falls outside the cavern, you will go forth, hunting. This is your new life, the life of a *vampire bat*. Forever.

THE END

11.

It would have been nice to go to the university, but you've got a lot of homework. As you walk across the schoolyard toward home, you hear a voice.

"Hey, nerd! I bet you think you're pretty smart, huh?" Oh no! Terry walks up to you. "Well? Don't have anything to say now?"

If you stand up to Terry, go to Section 16.

If you run away, go to Section 20.

12.

You've never seen it before. "You'll love it," Terry assures you, turning on the system. "I'll just play a couple times to show you how it works."

Uh oh, you've been in this situation before: it could be hours before Terry gives you a turn.

If you offer to take your chances, go to Section 15.

If you let Terry play first, go to Section 3.

13.

Obviously, Dr. LeCygne is insane. It was a mistake for you ever to come here. "I'm sorry," you say, hurriedly gathering your things. Before you can make your way to the door to leave, you are blinded by an intense flash of light. When you can see again, Dr. LeCygne is gone.

In his place is a tall, muscular man wearing blue trunks and boots like a wrestler. Incredibly, a giant pair of white, feathery wings sprouts from his back: they flex and curl with the animation of living flesh.

"I have shown you my true form," the once-LeCygne says, "as a last resort to convince you. As you have probably guessed, Maximilian Quadrax LeCygne is not my real name. I'm not even a real doctor. My real name is..."

Go to Section 6.

14.

The screen flashes the name of the game; Terry selects the two-player option, and you're off. Two winged humanoid figures fly over the landscape, shooting enemies on the ground and in the air. Although you

have the same goal--defeat the evil supercomputer Dark that has taken over the land--Terry isn't a very generous player, and knows where all the power-ups and treasures are. It's going to take all your skill to earn the high score!

If you have a Nintendo Entertainment System™ and a copy of *Legendary Wings*, play a game and look at the last digit of your final score. Or, if you're not really committed, you can roll a six-sided die. If you have already played against Terry, add one to your total for each time you have played.

If your total is 5 or lower, go to Section 19.

If your total is 6 or above, go to Section 25.

15.

"Think you can take me, huh?" Terry snorts. "Okay, your funeral. Let's see what you got. I'm gonna warn you, though, I've played this game a lot."

Go to Section 14.

16.

You don't like confrontations, and it's never been easy for you to stand up for yourself. Still, there's a time when you have to draw the line. You take a deep breath and stand your ground. Terry looks even bigger up close, but it's too late to back down now. "I'm not afraid of you. Leave me alone!"

Terry sizes you up--you're shaking, you've never been so tense--and finally laughs. "You're all right, kid. You wanna go to my place and play video games?"

Just like that, you're Terry's buddy. You're still intimidated, though. If Terry's mood could turn in your favor so quickly, who knows when it might turn back against you?

If you agree to play video games with Terry, go to Section 5.

If you decline, go to Section 9.

17.

Before you know it, you're walking through drainage ditches and across highway medians with your new friends Terry and Kevin. "It's in

the creek on the north end of town,” Kevin explains. “We found it earlier this morning, but we couldn’t hang around--that’s Wing territory.”

The Wings! You’ve heard of the legendary gang that runs the back alleys on the north end, but you never thought they were real.

“You think they did it?” Terry asks, matter-of-factly.

“Who knows?” This is starting to sound kind of scary.

“Did you call the police? When you found it?” you ask nervously.

Terry and Kevin both laugh at your suggestion.

“Police! Haw haw! What’re they gonna do?”

You remain silent. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

While walking through a shady bunch of trees near the road--there are no sidewalks in this part of town--you see a mysterious figure in the shadows, beckoning to you. Terry and Kevin don’t seem to notice it.

If you approach the beckoning figure, go to Section 28.

If you ignore it and keep going, go to Section 37.

18.

Dr. LeCygne appears crestfallen by your answer. “Ah, of course. I understand. It was really too much to ask, I shouldn’t have, uh...” He trails off. “We, ah, don’t have to involve your parents in this, do we?”

You assure him there are no hard feelings, but you’re eager to leave. You gather your things and get out of there as quickly as possible.

While walking home, you are lost in thought: What about the strange things you saw? Were you really a descendant of the Aresians? Your reverie is interpreted by a familiar and unwelcome voice.

“Hey dipwad, watch where you’re going!” You trip over Terry’s extended foot. Suddenly, you’re falling amidst a cascade of books and papers.

“Haw haw haw!” Terry looks a lot bigger looming over you. You redden. “Good one, nerd! Haw haw! What’s the matter? Don’t have anything to say now? Get up, nerd!”

If you stand up to Terry, go to Section 16.

If you run away, go to Section 20.

19.

Terry beats your score easily. “Haw! You stink at this game!” Terry does a victory dance that ends with Terry’s fingers “In. Your. Face.”

No matter how many times you play, the victory dance is the same.

“Think you’re up for a rematch, loser?”

If you suck it up and play again, go to Section 14.

If you’re going to be a baby about it, go to Section 22.

20.

Your heart is pounding, your breath heaving and loud in your ears. You hate to be a coward, but you’re just not up for a confrontation like this: the instinct to flee is overpowering. Terry’s words ring in your burning ears: “Come back, you coward!” You’ve run so far and so fast that you’re not even sure where you are. You clamber over broken pavement and through hedges and brambles.

Suddenly you’re at the top of a steep hill, about to pitch forward. Your momentum is so strong that there’s no way you’ll be able to stop yourself! You close your eyes and brace yourself for what’s sure to be a painful fall, but to your surprise you feel yourself caught in a pair of strong arms. You open your eyes tentatively: you’re gliding effortlessly over the hillside! Your shadow on the ground has a pair of giant wings! You look up: you *are* in the arms of a strong man with feathery brown wings attached to his back!

He lands effortlessly on the ground and smiles. “You looked like you needed a little help,” he says.

“Wh-where did you come from?” you ask.

“You could say I’ve been with you all along,” he says.

“Like a guardian angel?”

“Sort of. But you can call me...”

Go to Section 6.

21.

You leave the base with little fanfare. Everyone is counting on you; there is no need to emphasize how important your mission is. As you

and Kevin step off and ascend into the air, soaring over the massive granite cliffs, it suddenly occurs to you: *you're flying!* This is all real! For just a moment, you forget the fear of impending danger and savor the experience.

It's incredible. You've never felt this free. The wind supports you, pushes you, carrying you higher and higher. "Wahool!" you cry in ecstatic joy.

"Careful, friend," Kevin warns. "The first flight is exhilarating, but you must maintain control. We cannot fly too high, lest the thinness of the air confound our brains. Steady yourself!"

If you heed Kevin's warning, go to Section 41.

If you can handle flying just a little bit higher, go to Section 45.

22.

"Oh, please, are you gonna cry? I thought we were just having a little fun. Sheesh." Terry changes the setting to one player and returns to the game, ignoring you.

Go to section 3.

23.

Kevin takes you to a lavishly appointed cavern. A man with iron-gray hair, old but with all the strength and calm of an experienced leader, stands before you. Kevin drops to one knee and bids you to do the same. “Arise,” the stern old man says. “I am Ares, King of War.”

“King Ares of the land of Ares?” you ask.

“The King and the land are one,” he says. “Eons ago our forefathers built an artificial brain to order our society.”

“Dark,” you say.

“Yes, Dark. It helped our leaders lay down their weapons and build gleaming cities. For a thousand years, we lived in peace. Art and poetry flourished. The people no longer needed Ares, King of War. But something happened, and Dark became corrupt. In its madness, Dark reawakened the long-slumbering weapons systems and turned them on the people. In their need, they brought me back. And now you have been brought to me.”

“I don’t understand,” you say.

“Consider this your first lesson in war: it is not for you to understand, only to act. I can arm you, give you the power to fight against our enemies. Do you wish to take flight with the Legendary Wings?”

If you agree to join the Legendary Wings, go to Section 30.

If you still have doubts, go to Section 36.

24.

You’ve been hit by enemy lasers!

“Stay focused!” Kevin shouts. “You know what to do!”

Subtract one from your power level (move your token to the left).

If you are already at 0 power, go to Section 50.

If you rejoin the fight, go to Section 41.

25.

Terry is a tough contender, but you persevere and come through in the end. You've won!

You expect Terry to sulk or get angry, but, to your surprise, Terry is no longer there. Instead, a tall, muscular man with black feathery wings is holding the game controller. He looks pleased.

"Congratulations," he says. "I have visited many worlds, but none have played the simulation as well as you."

"Simulation? You mean...this is all real?"

"Yes, very much so. The Aresians are under attack by the supercomputer Dark, and I have sent copies of the simulator, disguised as a game, all over the universe to find a champion who can defend us."

Wow! It sounds just like something out of a movie!

"Exactly," the man laughs, as if he can read your thoughts.

"Who *are* you?"

"I have many names. But you may call me..."

Go to Section 6.

26.

"Kevin!" you cry. But Kevin is alright. In fact, aside from being a little singed, he looks back to normal!

"Dark had only implanted a chip in my brain to make me *think* I was a robot," he explains. "I calibrated the frequency of my blaster to burn it out."

"We can do that?"

"I could--thanks to you! I never would have been able to if you hadn't believed in me!"

"That's great, but, wait, you *looked* like a robot!"

Kevin looks thoughtful. "Maybe Dark implanted a chip in *you* to make you think *I* was a robot?" he suggests.

"Uh...maybe?"

You're distracted by banging on the doors and Dark's synthetic voice blaring over the loudspeaker: "SURRENDER HUMANOIDs."

You suddenly remember that you're still pinned in the command center!

"Where were we?" asks Kevin.

If you continue deactivating Dark, go to Section 103.

If you hit the self-destruct button, go to Section 47.

If you try to get the statue moving, go to Section 85.

27.

The King hangs his head and says, "Very well. If I can say nothing to persuade you, please step into the tunnel to the left. The war with Dark will trouble you no more."

You enter the tunnel he indicates. It's pitch black, and a chill wind blows through it. "Is this the way home?" you call, but your own voice echoes back; there is already no one to answer you.

Suddenly, you feel very sleepy; you collapse on the floor of the tunnel. When you awaken, something feels different.

Go to Section 10.

28.

When you step into the wood to get a better look, you see that the figure was standing at a doorway, the mouth of a cement tunnel into the hillside. It ducks inside as you get there, indicating for you to follow. You still can't get a good look. It's dark in the tunnel.

You stumble into the mysterious stranger as you round a dark corner. You don't know why you feel compelled to follow, but anything would be better than following Terry around.

"How would you like to experience *real* life and death?" says the stranger.

"I don't usually talk to strangers, especially in tunnels."

"Ah, but we have already met," says the stranger, walking further into the tunnel, and there *is* something familiar about his voice.

If you follow the stranger deeper into the tunnel, go to Section 32.

If you refuse, go to Section 42.

29.

Carried aloft by Kevin's strong wings, you're soon gliding over a beautiful countryside. Lush green fields are beneath you, dotted with farmhouses and periodically interrupted by crystal blue lakes and rugged granite outcroppings. "The Land of Ares...at least what is left of it," Kevin says wistfully, and you can tell from his distant expression that he is driven by love of his homeland rather than a lust for war.

Soon you reach a burned-over district, pocked with craters. The few structures remaining are stone tombs and toppled columns, blackened by clouds of toxic smoke. A strange, giant shape lurches on the horizon.

"Dark's moving statues. This is what the supercomputer has done to our land."

Hovering in the distance you see a large, glowing letter P.

"A power-up," Kevin explains, "the last remnant of Ares' broadcast power array. We warriors can still tap into it to charge our blasters."

"Blasters!" you exclaim. "Wow!"

"Do you want to take a closer look?"

To get closer to the power-up, go to Section 40.

If you've seen enough, go to Section 23.

30.

Kevin slaps you heartily on the back. "Excellent! You have made the right choice! I look forward to fighting alongside you as a comrade in arms."

At a signal from the King, you are quickly ushered into a medical facility. Groups of specialists prepare you for your "upgrade." The man in charge looks more like a wizard than a doctor; at his command a pair of golden, feathery wings are brought to you. "These are wings of Love and Courage," he explains. "Gifts from King Ares. If you're ready we'll attach them shortly."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. They will feel as if you've had them all along."

He's right. Once the pinions come into contact with your bare shoulder blades, they melt into your flesh almost instantly. There is only a slight chill, and then the wings are at your command; you can move them as naturally as you move your arms or legs. It's incredible!

Next the doctor produces a long metallic object with a jagged end. “This is an antenna that attaches to your spine. It will allow you to absorb energy from the broadcast power array to channel into your blasters. This is going to hurt quite a bit.”

Once again, he’s right. For all the Aresians’ technology, they’ve apparently never heard of anesthetic. After an agonizing half hour of surgery, you mercifully pass into unconsciousness.

Go to Section 35.

31.

Boom! Boom! Several of the flying machines explode into debris.

“Great shot!” Kevin says.

Put a check mark on your scratch paper.

If you have three check marks, go to Section 48.

Otherwise, go to Section 41.

32.

Your curiosity gets the better of you. You follow the stranger who seems to know you deeper into the tunnels, which are starting to look less like service tunnels and more like natural caverns. It’s so dark you can hardly see, and you stumble on the rough ground.

Suddenly there is enough light. You see you’re standing on a ledge overlooking a vast cavernous space, lit with some kind of artificial glow. Rolling green hillsides and rocky outcroppings unfold before you. And the stranger you followed here: it’s Dr. LeCygne, from the university!

“Yes, that is how I introduced myself,” he says, “but that is not my true identity.” LeCygne unfurls a pair of enormous, feathery wings from his back. Welcome to the underground kingdom of Ares. You may call me...”

Go to Section 6.

33.

You swallow, take a deep breath, and tear yourself from Kevin’s arm before he can stop you. You hear the sounds of battle all around you as you fall.

Splash! You were lucky. You land in one of the clear lakes you saw from the air. You paddle to the shore and pull yourself out.

Your foot catches on something at the edge of the water: a bony hand! Half-buried in the silt at the edge of the abandoned lake is a human skeleton with the remains of large wings like Kevin's: a fallen warrior. At first you are repulsed, but you notice something shiny clutched in the skeleton's other hand. It's a key.

You're not sure why, but you impulsively grab the key and put it in your pocket. Who knows? It might be important later.

Write "key" on your scratch paper. Don't forget you have it!

Then go to Section 38.

34.

No sooner have you dealt with the wave of flying enemies than there is another, even more aggressive and tenacious than the last!

If you take evasive action, go to Section 52.

If you charge into battle, guns blazing, go to Section 54.

35.

After a brief recovery period, you are directed to meet with the "Blaster Master" to calibrate your antenna and test your blasters.

"He's a little...different," Kevin warns you. You are directed to a tiny cave off the main tunnel. The Blaster Master is a short, wizened old man wearing dark goggles. His cavern is stuffed with old machine parts and equipment, like a mad scientist's laboratory.

"Ah!" the little man exclaims. "You are here to join the fight against the dark one."

"Dark?"

"We do not say his name! The powers of darkness are many, but we have developed our own, shall we say, 'enhancements' to aid our warriors." The little man unveils a small machine. "Tell no one of what you see here," he warns, "for there has never been the like in all the world until now!"

"It looks just like a Nintendo Entertainment System™!" you exclaim.

The little man grows testy. “But can your Nintendo Entertainment System™ do this?” He pulls a cartridge labeled “RNG 05” from his robe and inserts it into the console. On the screen a graphic of a six-sided die is displayed. As it rotates, flashing from one number to another, he tells you, “Press ‘A!’”

After you do so, the die stops and you feel a charge run down your spine. He has you take aim at a target and fire.

“Just think it,” he instructs you.

Zap! A blast of power comes out of your hands.

“Mm-hmm,” he murmurs, marking a chart.

On your scratch paper, write a blank line, and the word “POWER,” like this:

_____ P O W E R

Roll a six-sided die and subtract one from the result. Counting from the left, place your token on the corresponding letter (0 = blank, 1 = P, 2 = O, etc.). This is your starting power level; power-ups will move your token to the right, and damage in battle will move it to the left. You will never be higher than 5; if your power level goes below 0, you will pass out...or worse!

Go to Section 21 to begin your mission.

36.

“Confusion is natural. This all must be very sudden.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help,” you stammer, “but this isn’t my fight. Where I come from, this war is ancient history.”

“History it may be, but the outcome of this fight could still affect your future!” the King says. “The Legendary Wings represent the culmination of millions of years of evolution, the better to fight Dark, the pinnacle of technological development.”

“How can that be?” you ask. “Are you saying this battle is somehow in my world’s future?”

“Such is the cyclical nature of time,” the King replies, and it is clear he has nothing else to say on the matter. “You have only the present moment before you. Now choose: will you join the Legendary Wings, yea or nay?”

If you agree, go to Section 30.

If you refuse, go to Section 27.

37.

You put it out of your mind and hurry to catch up. “This is taking forever,” Terry gripes.

“Hey, we could have been there already if we’d ridden our bikes,” Kevin says.

“I told you, my bike’s in the shop.”

“The *shop*, right. How long’s it been there, seven months? I don’t think you even *have* a bike!”

“Shut up, dude!”

Their bickering is driving you crazy, and they seem to be ignoring you, not caring whether you catch up or not.

If you suggest the three of you do something else, go to Section 49.

If you keep your mouth shut and keep following them, go to Section 72.

38.

Kevin lands near you after destroying the enemy guns. He doesn’t see the skeleton in the reeds by the lake.

“That was quick thinking,” he says. “I couldn’t have destroyed that cannon while holding on to you. But it isn’t safe here. Let us head to the base and join King Ares.”

Go to Section 23.

39.

Kaboom! You blast through all the flying robots at once. Even Kevin looks surprised. “Truly you are the champion of Ares!” he says.

The way is clear. The two of you fly forward, meeting little obstacle from Dark’s war machinery. Soon, the temple that Dark has made into its base--a giant statue, half buried in the earth--looms before you.

You fly directly into the statue’s open mouth.

Go to Section 65.

40.

Kevin leans in toward the floating P, still holding you in his arms. It’s bigger than it looked from a distance, and farther away. Kevin flies closer and closer to the line of burned-out villages, which makes you nervous, but he seems to know where he’s going.

Suddenly, a brightly colored laser blast explodes too close to you. Someone is shooting at you!

“There! A hidden gunner station!” Kevin points out. He extends one hand and fires a blast from his palm, but it’s awkward to fire while holding onto you. Your weight is throwing off his aim, and you’re flying too low to safely avoid the gunners. A succession of fields and waterways pass quickly underneath you. It’s pretty far down, but you might just make it if you jump.

If you jump from Kevin’s arms, go to Section 33.

If you hang on to Kevin, go to Section 46.

If you beg Kevin to turn back, go to Section 43.

41.

He's right, of course; you struggle to calm yourself and focus on the battle at hand. "Here they come!" Kevin calls, and you see them: a phalanx of flying robots, gleaming in the sunlight. They're coming straight at you.

To fire your blasters, roll a six-sided die and add your power level (0 to 5).

If your total is 3 or less, go to Section 24.

If your total is 4 to 8, go to Section 31.

If your total is 9 or more, go to Section 39.

If you take evasive action to avoid the robots, go to Section 34.

42.

"I'm sorry," you say, "but I need to get back to my...friends." Considering the alternative, even Kevin and Terry seem less threatening.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," the stranger says. He pulls a small bag from his pocket and says, "I hope you'll understand I can't have you remembering this entrance to our kingdom. This dust will make you forget we ever had this conversation and you can get back to normal."

Before you can protest, he blows a handful of dust into your face. It makes you feel light-headed.

The last thing you hear before you sink into unconsciousness is, "Oops! Wrong dust!"

"What?" you say, but you're already fading away. When you awaken, you remember everything, but you don't feel back to normal.

Go to Section 10.

43.

“Turn back!” you shout over the explosive blasts. “You don’t have to show me the power-ups if it’s too dangerous!”

“Your words are wise,” says Kevin after he has turned around and flown back to safety. “Never have I turned my back on a fight, but I have been entrusted with your safety by my sacred oath. Besides, once you have received your wings from King Ares, you will be able to see all this and more for yourself!”

Go to Section 23.

44.

Michelle removes the glossy black figure from its velvet shroud. “At last,” she breathes, its majestic shape reflected in her wide eyes. She turns to you with a newfound respect. “I guess my colleague was right about you. If anyone were able to recover this, he said it would be you.”

She scans every inch of it greedily, drinking it in with her eyes.

“The legendary Winged Victory: last treasure of the fabled Aresians, owned by Sultans, Kings, and Popes, and now...”

“Save the history for your buddies on the museum board, doll,” you say coolly. “I’m more interested in the future...specifically between you and me.”

She laughs coldly. “Oh, I’ve given a lot of thought to my future, but I think you’ve used up all you had left.” Suddenly she’s holding a snub-nosed pistol in her hand, pointed your way.

It all makes sense now. “You killed LeCygne.”

“He knew too much. And now, so do you.”

“Listen, doll, don’t do anything crazy...”

“It’s too late for that. I’ve made a lot of promises, and I can’t keep all of them. Sorry, but there’s only room for one in this lifeboat.”

Bang! Suddenly you’re on the floor, your life draining away. The last thing you see is Michelle’s high heels as she leaves the room, and Kevin’s words to you are the last you hear ringing in your ears: “Never trust a dame.”

THE END

45.

Kevin doesn't know what he's talking about. He's obviously jealous of your strength, your power. Didn't he say that Ares needed you? Another few hundred feet of height won't hurt a bit.

You pump your wings, pushing against the air and enjoying the muscular action of your new appendages. It feels so good. Higher. Just a little bit higher. Kevin's protests fade away as you leave him behind. Then you hear laughter. Who's laughing?

It takes you a moment to realize that the laughter is coming from you, bubbling up unbidden. You're lightheaded, but you keep flying up. Or are you descending? It's getting hard to tell.

The horizon is just a line. Who's to say which is the land and which is the sky? Too late, you see the details of Aresian war camps, Dark's moving statues, and burned villages coming toward you at breakneck speed. Is your final cry before you strike the earth a scream of fear or the yawp of a liberated spirit?

THE END

46.

It's no use. Try as he might, Kevin is unable to fight effectively while supporting your weight. A laser blast tears through his wings; the heat of the blast is enough to singe your skin. You're both falling, tumbling through the air.

Kevin's last act is to wrap his wings around you and roll as you both hit the ground. After the shock and the smell of burnt feathers have worn off, you look around. You're alive, but hurt badly. Your arm doesn't bend correctly. It hurts to put weight on your ankle.

"Kevin?" you call. He's still where he fell; you can tell he doesn't have much time left.

"I'm...sorry," he whispers. "I didn't protect you when it counted." A trickle of blood emerges from his mouth.

You try to tell them that he did protect you, that he saved your life, but it's too late. He can't hear you anymore. You're alone now, hurt and afraid in a strange, dangerous world.

You start to make your way toward what you hope is safety.

Go to Section 61.

47.

“Let’s just cut to the chase,” you say, showing Kevin the big red self-destruct button.

“Agreed,” Kevin answers. “It ends now.” Together, you join hands and press down the button together.

Go to Section 73.

48.

The entire wave of enemies is destroyed. As the smoke clears over the aerial battlefield, you see a shining letter P hovering in the air. Beyond it, a second wave of enemies is approaching, even bigger than the first.

“Take that power-up!” Kevin says. “You earned it, soldier!” As you fly into the billboard-sized letter, an electric charge runs down your spine. You feel flush with crackling energy.

Add one to your power level (move your token to the right); remember, you can’t exceed 5.

Go to Section 59.

49.

“...well, the *most* dangerous game is probably *Bionic Commando*,” Terry is saying. “Darn near dislocated my shoulder trying to pull off those moves.”

“Hey, uh, I’ve been thinking,” you say from the rear. “The police have probably already picked up that body anyway, so what do you say we do something else, like say, uh, shoplifting?”

Kevin and Terry laugh. “Good one,” Terry says. “I *told* you this kid was funny.”

Go to Section 68.

50.

An intense pain suddenly sears through your shoulder. “I’m hit!” you cry. You can’t stay airborne, so you drift unsteadily to the ground.

“Get down! I’ll cover you!” Kevin shouts.

He covers your descent with laser fire as Dark’s cannons flare and burst around you. The noise is deafening, but there is a ghostly calm at ground level. Among the ash and bones of the once-peaceful Aresian countryside, now a no-man’s land, you examine your wound; a perfectly circular hole has been burned through one of your wings.

“Nasty,” Kevin says. “You’re lucky to be alive, but you’ll never fly again.”

A cry of grief and anger erupts from deep within your soul: “DAAAAAAARK!!!”

You hope that Kevin is wrong. Maybe you could try one last time to take flight?

If you try to fly again, go to Section 55.

If you stay on the ground, go to Section 58.

51.

Beneath you is an enormous bust of stone, half buried in the earth in such a way that you can only make it out clearly from the air. It’s just like the statues Dr. LeCygne showed your class—that seems like a lifetime ago—but much bigger.

Suddenly, a giant plume of smoke streams from the statue’s mouth! In the smoky haze, the landscape looks different: the ground looks like a vast, featureless expanse of sheet metal, dotted with geodesic domes and solar panels! And instead of ancient stone, the statue appears to be gleaming metal, dotted with blinking electric lights! The sky appears black and dotted with stars, as if you’re in outer space, but the vision passes.

Meanwhile, the smoke is being sucked back into the mouth of the statue, and you with it! “Don’t fight it,” Kevin says, “that is our destination!”

Once you have been pulled down to ground level, you can see just how huge the statue is. From down here, the contours of its head and shoulders are nearly indistinguishable from the foothills of the granite mountains.

“The Devil is waiting for us in the Palace,” Kevin says. “Rush courageously!”

Go to Section 65.

52.

Try as you might, it’s impossible to dodge all the laser fire coming at you. Bursts of cannon fire from the ground explode all around you. Kevin is firing madly in all directions.

“Fire!” he yells desperately. “For Ares’ sake, use your blasters!”

It’s too late. You’re struck by laser fire in your wings. There’s nothing you can do. You’re starting to lose altitude.

Before you hit the ground, Kevin swoops in to rescue you. “No, save yourself!” you shout over the deafening explosions. “I got us into this mess with my cowardly refusal to bear arms!”

“Not cowardly,” Kevin reassures you. “Your love of peace is too pure for this time. Ah, if only you could have seen Ares in its glory days! Your poets’ spirit would have been right at home.”

“Just let me die,” you say hopelessly. It’s clear that Kevin won’t be able to protect you and fight off the machines at the same time.

“Never! You are like a sibling to me,” he says. But time is short.

Go to Section 46.

53.

You’ve been hit by enemy lasers! “Stay focused!” Kevin shouts. “You know what to do!”

Subtract one from your power level (move your token to the left).

If you are already at 0 power, go to Section 50.

To rejoin the fight, go to Section 59.

54.

You fly into the storm of whirling robotic wings and pinging lasers; you won’t have the chance to evade them this time. There are so many lasers firing in every direction, the prismatic effect is nearly blinding. You and Kevin are both firing like you’ve got the Turbo button pressed.

“Autofire! That’s it! We’ve got them on the run!” Kevin cries. You’ve never felt adrenaline like this. “There! You take that side!” Kevin directs you.

Go to Section 59.

55.

It’s immediately clear that something is wrong. You can’t maintain your balance and the winds buffet you mercilessly. Cold fear grips you: you’re a sitting duck for Dark’s minions. Explosions burst all around you, and in seemingly no time the worst happens.

“Aaaargh!” you cry as a direct hit to your torso tears you apart. The pain is so overwhelming you can’t make out Kevin’s words; even the sounds of lasers blur together. As you spiral helplessly to the ground, your only comfort is the replacement of agony with a creeping numbness. At least you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.

THE END

56.

Luckily, you have all the supplies you need to make a map as you explore the tunnels. If anything, the foes you encounter here are much worse than those you fought in the air: even describing them might be too much for you to handle, so close your eyes, stick your hands into the peeled grapes and cold spaghetti, and use your imagination.

During the battle, you earn a power-up!

Add one to your power level (move your token to the right); remember, you can’t exceed 5.

Go to Section 62.

57.

The entire wave of enemies is destroyed. As the smoke clears over the aerial battlefield, you see a shining letter P hovering in the air. “A power-up!” Kevin says. “Get it, it’s on your side!”

As you fly into the billboard-sized letter, an electric charge runs down your spine. You feel flush with crackling energy.

Add one to your power level (move your token to the right); remember, you can't exceed 5.

Go to Section 51.

58.

"You're right," you sadly admit. A few tentative movements of the injured wing convince you that the corridors of the sky are forever closed to you. Kevin helps you make it on foot to an Aresian safe house, and then takes his leave.

"The war against Dark continues," he says by way of goodbye. "You have fought bravely and honorably, and you will not be forgotten." The Aresian doctors nurse you back to health over a matter of months, helping you make sense of the intense violence that has wracked the country and your psyche. Eventually, they release you to make your way in the land of Ares, at least for the little time it has left.

Go to Section 61.

59.

He's right, of course; you struggle to calm yourself and focus on the battle at hand. Death to the robotic overlords! *Sic semper mechanis!*

To fire your blasters, roll a six-sided die and add your power level (0 to 5).

If your total is 3 or less, go to Section 53.

If your total is 4 to 8, go to Section 63.

If your total is 9 or more, go to Section 39.

60.

“Wait,” Kevin says. “Your name is Kevin, too? Hey, small world, bro.” You bump fists with the older Kevin.

“All right, all right,” Terry says, “So you’re both named Kevin. What’s this about a dead body?”

To see the dead body, go to Section 17.

If you’re not interested, go to Section 9.

61.

As you wander the decimated countryside, you stumble upon a still-standing farmhouse. Perhaps you can earn a meal and a stack of hay to sleep on by doing some odd jobs around the farm.

Your knock on the door is answered by a slender, pretty girl, or by a muscular, handsome farm boy. The deprivations of war have taken their toll but the inner beauty of youth is still present.

At first, your injury and the trauma of war puts a wall, a metaphorical one, between you and your host. You pursue your labors around the farm, all the while admiring the tough spirit of the farm boy or girl. Likewise, he or she comes to see the sensitive, wounded soul beneath your scar tissue. One night, when the cold wind is blowing, he or she invites you into his or her house.

“There is plenty of warmth inside, if you care to take it,” she, or possibly he, says. After that night you never sleep in the barn again.

Time passes, and you accept that this is your life, and it’s a good life for all its challenges. The villagers no longer have a priest, most of the able-bodied having been drafted or killed by Dark’s minions, but you and he or she consider yourself married by common law.

She is your wife, or he is your husband, and after a season you plant a growing life in her, or he plants it in you. Nine months later a child is born; perhaps when he or she grows up, he or she will be able to take up the battle against Dark, and finish what you could not.

THE END

62.

After a time, you find an enormous steel door with a keyhole in the middle.

“That must be something important,” Kevin muses. “There haven’t been any doors anywhere else here. I bet I could get through it with my blasters, though.”

“Wait!” you say.

If you have the key, go to Section 71.

If you offer to blast the door yourself, go to Section 76.

If you suggest leaving the door alone, go to Section 83.

63.

Boom! Boom! Several of the flying machines explode into debris. “Great shot!” Kevin says.

Put an X on your scratch paper.

If you have three Xs, go to Section 57.

Otherwise, go to Section 59.

64.

You make your way to the bottom of the culvert where a trickle of water flows through a weedy ditch. Sprawled in the ditch is a teenage boy with long greasy hair. He’s wearing a denim jacket with a P crudely stitched on the front. There’s no sign of violence; if he weren’t so pale and waxy he might only be asleep.

Terry and Kevin are both silent; for all their bravado, this is a new and disquieting experience for both of them.

“Is he...one of the Wings?” you ask softly.

“Naw,” says a voice from behind you. The three of you whirl around: a gang of tough-looking punks is there, cutting off your only way out of the culvert. The evident leader of the gang continues, “He was a P Wing, from the south side, and he crossed into our territory. And now, so have you. What’re we gonna do about that?”

The other gang members laugh menacingly.

Go to Section 70.

65.

The main entrance chamber inside the giant statue's mouth is huge and cavernous. There is a strange smell like burnt electrical wire. As you step forward, the floor feels spongy and wet; as your eyes adjust to the gloom, you see that the walls glisten and quiver like the inside of a throat. "It's . . . alive?" you ask hesitantly.

"It would appear so," Kevin says. "Your guess is as good as mine. None of our warriors have gotten this far...and come back."

"It's too low to fly," you observe.

"Yes, it appears we'll go on foot from here. It's like two games in one."

"Games?"

"Er, the Aresian words for 'game' and 'challenge' are the same," Kevin explains.

"But how do we know which tunnel to take?"

"We'll have to mark our path so we don't get lost," Kevin says. "Do you have a pencil and scratch paper? And perhaps a small token, such as a coin, game piece, or acorn?"

If you have those things, go to Section 56.

If not, go to Section 77.

66.

You sit awkwardly in the captain's chair, making room for your wings. The screens adjust themselves to your height, showing you views of the entire complex, including Dark, the mechanical brain. Several things are clear to you now.

"This must have been the original command center, when Dark was built to serve Ares! We might be able to shut it down from here!" you say excitedly. "And look at this: there are controls for arms, legs, head...*this statue is a giant robot*: it can move!"

"Wow!" Kevin exclaims. "Well, let's see what we can do!"

"HUMANOIDS...YOU MUST CEASE..." came the droning voice of Dark over the address system.

If you try to get the statue to move, go to Section 85.

If you try to deactivate Dark, go to Section 93.

67.

You're standing over the body. At first you're so shocked you can hardly process it, and then you manage to say, "It's...*me*."

It *is* you, looking just as you did earlier today, but lying still and cold on the ground. "K-Kevin?"

"I'm sorry," Kevin says. "I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how. It was just easier to show you."

"So I'm..."

"Yes. You've been a ghost *the whole time*. I think I was meant to help you accept it so you could move on."

Maybe he's right. As the truth sinks in, you begin to fade into insubstantial mist.

"At least...I'll finally have my wings," you say, and it's just a whisper, before you disappear completely.

THE END

68.

"I like the way you think," says Kevin, "but that'll have to wait. We're already here."

Go to Section 64.

69.

"Wait," you say desperately. Kevin hesitates, his blaster still leveled at you. "This can't be all there is to you: there must be some humanity left in you."

"DESTROY...THE INTRUDER..." Dark's robotic voice commands.

"Destroy the intruder," Kevin echoes flatly. "I must...obey."

"You don't have to listen to Dark," you plead. "I know you. I fought beside you. Remember who you are!"

"DESTROY...DESTROY..."

Kevin's face contorts as he wrestles to recover his true nature. With great effort he aims his palm blaster away from you...and toward his own head!

Zzap!

Go to Section 26.

70.

“I think we’re gonna have to teach these intruders a lesson,” says the leader. “Let’s see: who’s gonna get it?”

He smacks his fist into his palm meaningfully.

“Eenie, meenie, miney...you!”

He’s pointing right at you. Kevin and Terry back away from you, as scared of the gang as you are.

The other gang members call their leader “Dragon,” and when he takes off his jacket to fight you see why: up and down his bare arms are tattoos of red scales. He moves into the clearing. His gang has ringed the area, chanting “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

How are you going to win this fight?

If you’ve been taking karate for years, go to Section 80.

If you picked up fighting tips reading about ancient Aresian martial arts, go to Section 99.

If you’ve spent 100+ hours playing *Karate Champ*, *Ring King*, and/or *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* on your Nintendo Entertainment System™, go to Section 88.

To run away, go to Section 20.

71.

You pull the key from your pocket and insert it into the keyhole. It fits!

“Where did you get that key?” Kevin asks.

“I...found it, in the countryside,” you say.

“Huh. Well, good work!”

The two of you swing open the giant door. On the other side is a fantastic collection of control panels and viewscreens, with a captain’s chair in the middle. It’s evidently some kind of control room. As you enter the banks of computers light up and hum to life.

You hear a droning, mechanical voice through the loudspeaker: “INTRUDER ALERT, INTRUDER ALERT...”

“That’s Dark! It knows we’re here! Come on, close that door!” Kevin says. Together, you slam the door. What now?

If you sit in the command chair, go to Section 66.

If you have Kevin sit in it, go to Section 79.

72.

Kevin and Terry are discussing something they call “round ball,” which you suppose could refer to baseball. Aren’t most balls round?

“How about you, champ?” Kevin asks you. “You play any sports?”

“Liftin’ dictionaries,” Terry snorts.

If you consider table tennis a sport, go to Section 82.

How about chess? Go to Section 98.

Is there any sport finer than those you can play on the Nintendo Entertainment System™? It’s like hundreds of games in one! Go to Section 68.

73.

“TEN...NINE...EIGHT...” Dark’s robotic voice counts down toward the destruction of the entire complex.

“What are we going to do now?” Kevin asks.

You’ll have to think fast!

If you try to escape the complex before it explodes, go to Section 105.

If you want to make sure Dark is destroyed, go to Section 108.

74.

The gang members put Dragon’s old jacket on your shoulders. Now you’re the leader of the legendary Wings!

Kevin cheers along with the gang, and Terry steps forward, embraces you and passionately kisses you on the mouth. Did I mention

that Terry is the opposite sex from you? Or the same sex? Whatever you like, really; I'm not here to judge.

It's been quite a day: one thing's for sure, things are going to be different from now on.

THE END

75.

The wriggling brain particles adhere to your skin. Worse than the pain is the sensation of being invaded by Dark's alien intelligence. "Aaargh!" you cry.

Kevin tries to help you remove the parasites, but he's under fire too and can only do so much. Eventually your fighting spirit is replaced with a creeping numbness and you black out. Who knows where--or what--you will be when--or if--you regain consciousness?

Roll a six-sided die (do *not* add your power level).

If you rolled a 1, go to Section 10.

If you rolled a 2, go to Section 44.

If you rolled a 3, go to Section 67.

If you rolled a 4, go to Section 102.

If you rolled a 5, go to Section 106.

If you rolled a 6, go to Section 110.

76.

“Save your strength, and let me try,” you say.

You stand squarely in front of the giant door and fire your blasters at it with all your might. Before you can even react, the shining steel reflects your blast right at you! You reel from the shock, and collapse into Kevin’s arms. Everything is spinning, and soon inky blackness overtakes you.

When you awaken, something is different.

Go to Section 10.

77.

“Let’s try this way,” you suggest, taking a guess. The many tunnels and chambers look alike to you. You shudder involuntarily as you think about how horrible it would be to be stuck here forever.

Go to Section 78.

78.

This tunnel looks the same as the last. How long have you been wandering through the corridors of the giant statue? “We’ve been going in circles,” you exclaim in frustration. Kevin nods wearily. He doesn’t have any idea where you’re going, either.

Go to Section 77.

79.

“Go ahead,” you say, “you’re the senior commanding officer.”

“Actually, I’m your subordinate,” Kevin says. “*You* are the champion of Ares. But that being true, I am bound to follow your command.” He sits in the command chair, making room for his feathery wings.

Suddenly, the lights dim and a klaxon begins sounding.

“SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE INITIATED,” Dark’s synthesized voice announces.

“Uh oh!” Kevin says. What now?

Go to Section 73.

80.

You step forward and assume the “crane” position, ready to defend yourself. Dragon punches you in the gut. You fold like a gambler with a pair of deuces. Then Dragon is on top of you, raining blows as you helplessly try to fend him off.

“Stop! Stop!” Kevin and Terry plead. The Wings pull Dragon off you and indicate a police siren in the distance.

“You got lucky,” Dragon sneers in parting. “Otherwise you woulda ended up like your friend here.”

“Let’s scram,” says Kevin. He and Terry support you and walk you away from the culvert.

“Are you hurt?” asks Terry.

“Just my pride,” you say, suppressing a groan. “You should see the other guy.”

Terry laughs with relief. “You know something? You’re pretty cool...for a nerd.”

THE END

81.

You have no time to think or speak, only to react to Dark’s insistent attacks. The slightest opening could be the difference between victory and defeat!

If your power level is 5, go to Section 90.

Otherwise, roll a six-sided die and add your power level.

If your total is 2 or less, go to Section 89.

If your total is 3-6, go to Section 96.

If your total is 7-8, go to Section 87.

If your total is 9 or above, go to Section 94.

82.

Terry snorts again. “Lame.” Kevin has a strange look on his face, and makes a warning gesture to Terry.

“Look, we’re almost there.”

Soon, you’re in a clearing; a rocky creek runs through the center. There’s something heaped in the middle of it. “Take a look,” Kevin says somberly.

Go to Section 67.

83.

“Leave it alone,” you tell Kevin. “I’ve got a bad feeling about that door.”

Kevin reluctantly lowers his blaster and says, “Maybe you’re right. Let’s keep going!”

Before long, you stand at the edge of a vast, dark precipice: just out of the range of your vision, you hear an ominous hum. It gets louder and louder.

“This is it,” Kevin says. “Whatever happens, it has been an honor to fight by your side.”

You agree. The humming has risen to a deafening volume. From the darkness emerges a giant complex of chrome and glass.

At last, you stand before Dark, the massive Aresian supercomputer that has caused so much turmoil. You had no idea the description of Dark as an “artificial brain” was so literal; it’s a huge, pulsating mass of wrinkled gray matter encased in gleaming protective armor, hovering in empty space.

Awe and revulsion compete to overtake you, but Dark doesn’t give you much time for reflection; its booster rockets fire and suddenly it’s coming at you! Dark fires its laser cannons. Prepare for battle!

Go to Section 81.

84.

The Aresian people are so grateful that you have liberated them that they offer to make you their leader. Ares, the King of War, tells you, “It’s the natural order of things. My time is over. Now the Aresians have you to lead them. In addition, I invite you to take the hand of my son or daughter in marriage. What do you say?”

If you agree, go to Section 100.

If you decline, go to Section 95.

85.

The controls are completely intuitive. You take control of the buried statue and “tell” it to sit up, as naturally as you move your own body.

“INTRUDERS...CEASE...” Dark drones on. The banging on the door outside continues.

It begins with a rumble, getting louder and louder. Soon the entire room is shaking like you’re at the epicenter of a violent earthquake. “Hold on!” you tell Kevin.

You quickly strap yourself in so you won’t be thrown from the command chair. You’re rocked back and forth and feel a sensation of rising quickly as the statue lurches to life, throwing off its earthen prison. The noises from outside the steel door trail off as the creatures outside are scattered by the change in equilibrium.

Watching through the view screens, you can “see” through the statue’s eyes. You survey the landscape you now tower above.

“CEASE...UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL...” Dark sounds quite helpless, simply along for the ride. You’re in control now!

“What should we do first?” Kevin asks.

If you guide the statue back to the battlefield, go to Section 109.

If you try to destroy Dark from here, go to Section 92.

If you just want to explore, go to Section 104.

86.

You're not fast enough. Kevin blasts you point-blank while your ineffectual blow glances off the wall behind him.

"WELL DONE..." Dark's synthesized voice crackles through the loudspeaker. "ONCE WE HAVE CONQUERED THE LAND OF ARES...YOUR PLANET WILL BE NEXT, HUMANOID...STARTING WITH YOUR PARENTS...THEY WILL BE ENSLAVED...DIGGING FOR SILICON IN THE TRANSISTOR MINES..."

The pain is intense. It's all you can do to stay conscious long enough to grit your teeth, pull yourself up in the command chair and say, "Not if I have anything to say about it." You see the red button in front of you: your death will be a small price to pay for ridding the universe of this menace.

"THE HUMANOID LIVES...DESTROY THE HUMANOID..." Dark commands the robotic Kevin. "EXECUTE!"

You slam your fist down on the big red self-destruct button and say, "File not found, mother sucker!"

The entire complex explodes in a pulse-pounding, senses-shattering explosion, taking Dark with it. *KRAK-A-BOOOOOM!!!!*

THE END

87.

Suddenly, the glass dome encasing Dark's enormous brain slides open. Something pink and slimy is ejected from the mass and comes straight at you. Dark is shooting particles of its brain matter at you!

"Don't let it touch you!" Kevin yells, but you didn't need him to say that. Instinctive, primal horror takes over; you must not come into contact with the loathsome brain particles, lest you descend into a nightmare from which you may never awaken!

Roll a six-sided die (do *not* add your power level).

If you rolled a 1, go to Section 75.

If you rolled 2-5, go to Section 81.

If you rolled a 6, go to Section 94.

88.

Luckily, your gaming experience has honed your hand-eye coordination, focus, and sense of timing to razor sharpness. You enter the makeshift arena and assume a “crane” position, waiting for Dragon to make his move.

As soon as he throws a punch, you block it and counterstrike. Body blow! Body blow! Your up-up-down-down-left-right-left-right-B-A combo stuns him and throws him backward. You reassume the “crane” position and wait for him to recover, anticipating the opening that will allow you to take him down once and for all.

There it is! A patch in the middle of his chest is glowing, pulsing on and off. That must be his weak spot! The next time he comes in for a punch, you make a leaping kick, landing it right on his glowing sternum!

To the gang’s surprise, Dragon explodes in a prismatic burst of light. After a moment of stunned silence, the gang members come forward.

“Thank you for freeing us from Dragon’s evil spell,” one says, “but now we are without a leader. Will you help us?”

If you agree to lead the Wings, go to Section 74.

If you decline, go to Section 95.

89.

You and Kevin fight bravely, but the tide turns against you. Stinging pain shoots through your body as the hideous particles of Dark’s brain tissue make contact with you. It’s all you can do to keep fighting. You back off and gather your strength for one final push against the giant brain.

Subtract one from your power level (move your token to the left).

If your power level is already 0, go to Section 75.

Otherwise, go to Section 81.

90.

Face to face with Dark, you feel a strange change rippling through your body. You've maximized the power you can draw from the broadcast array, and you feel yourself transformed into a powerful avian form: perhaps a mighty eagle, or a fiery phoenix!

"The Turtle Dove!" Kevin exclaims.

"The what?" you ask through your razor-sharp beak.

"You've assumed the Turtle Dove form. It's a very important symbol for our people. Dark will be no match for you now!"

"Great," you squawk. But he's right: the feeling of power is exhilarating.

As huge and intimidating as the giant cyborg brain may be, it's no match for the Turtle Dove power-up. You feel vital energy coursing through you, bubbling up from deep within. Its hot, insistent pressure forces itself out of you, directed right into the center of the soft, wet brain.

"Great shot!" ejaculates Kevin. Deeply satisfied, you keep firing until you're completely spent. Dark is no more; it's taken all you can give it, and collapsed like a wet tissue.

Go to Section 84.

91.

"This isn't easy," Kevin says. "This is the key to the whole story." He unfolds a piece of lined spiral notebook paper. On it is a crude ballpoint pen drawing of a man with feathery wings and a stylized heart on his chest. He's flying over a roughly sketched landscape of statues and Greek temples. You recognize it as a doodle you made in class earlier that day, when Dr. LeCygne was lecturing about the Aresians.

"Where did you get this?" you ask.

"I found it on a dead body," Kevin says. He takes you by the hand. "Come with me." Together you walk into a bright light.

Go to Section 67.

92.

“I think I have an idea,” you say to Kevin. On the screens you can see Dark, a giant brain encased in robotic armor, from several vantage points. You’re pretty sure you know where it is. “How’d you like to rid the land of Ares of Dark once and for all?”

“That has been my life’s goal,” says Kevin.

“That’s what I thought. Then, hang on! Dark, are you listening?”
“AFFIRMATIVE.”

“This is going to hurt you a lot more than it hurts me!” You take control of the giant statue’s powerful arms.

“NEGATIVE...ABORT...ABORT...”

“No can do, Dark,” you say.

Controlling the statue’s arms as easily as you move your own, you windmill them around and slam them together, punching the statue’s own head with titanic force.

KABOOOM!! You hear the explosion above you; the entire statue shudders and lurches. The view of the landscape on the computer screens tilts crazily, and several wink out entirely, including the views of Dark.

“You did it!” Kevin says in awe. But, wait. Won’t the statue collapse now?”

“Have you forgotten? We have wings. We can fly!”

You leave the command center; all the enemies are gone from the corridors, having fled or been deactivated. You were just under the throat of the great statue, so it doesn’t take long to reach the shattered opening. You and Kevin take flight as the entire statue collapses. Beneath you the now-headless statue sprawls across the blasted landscape, nothing but a smoking ruin.

Go to Section 84.

93.

“INTRUDER ALERT...ALL UNITS TO COMMAND CENTER...” the synthesized voice drones as you explore the switches and gauges, trying to figure out which command will deactivate the deranged supercomputer. Luckily, it’s a UNIX system.

Hammering sounds can be heard through the steel door; Dark has you pinned in the command center.

Finally, you find the modular quantum transponder, the key to Dark’s independent thought processes. “Now, if I can just reverse the polarity!” you say.

“CEASE UNAUTHORIZED OPERATION...” the computer says, and if you didn’t know better you’d think it was pleading for its life. Its voice slows and dips in pitch as you uncouple its energon cubes. “ALE-E-E-ERT...”

“Kevin, help me pull these out!” you say. It has to be done in a precise order matching the intersection of the Fibonacci sequence and the squares of ascending prime numbers.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin says flatly. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Kevin’s voice sounds eerily similar to Dark’s.

Go to Section 101.

94.

The battle is intense: Dark moves in aggressively, ejecting particles of brain matter as deadly missiles! Gradually you push back against the giant brain, pummeling its steel and plastic exterior with your laser blasts. The shell opens again for another expulsion of brain tissue. This is your chance!

With one well-placed shot, you fire directly into the exposed brain. Your powerful laser sears through cerebral tissue like a hot knife through butter. The giant brain briefly lights up from within, glowing like an incandescent bulb, before exploding into a million pieces.

It’s like an atom bomb going off, but even better. Victory is yours; a winner is you!

Go to Section 84.

95.

You awaken in your own bed at home. You look out the window and hear chirping birds and the bustle of everyday life. What a dream you had! It was so vivid, you could have sworn it was real. Already, it's slipping away, but you feel a confidence inside that you didn't have before. Whether it was real or not, you're a different person today. Who knows what you'll do with the day, the life, before you?

THE END

96.

This is the most blistering firefight you've experienced since you gained your wings. Lasers and explosions dazzle and nearly blind you. The noise is deafening.

If you didn't have Kevin by your side the battle might be overwhelming, but between the two of you the forces of good are able to hang on, at least for now.

Draw a star on your scratch paper. If you have three stars, go to Section 94.

Otherwise, go to Section 81.

97.

Kevin's blast leaves a hole in the top of the computer console; you duck just in time to avoid it, slamming down the big red self-destruct button. When you turn back, the robotic Kevin stares blankly and crumples to the ground. Behind him is the real Kevin!

"That was sneaky of Dark to slip a robot double in here while you were distracted!" he says. "But one good shock to his operating system, and he shouldn't bother us anymore." He sees the smoking crater left by the robot's blaster and says, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but I just activated the self-destruct sequence!" you say, indicating the numbers counting down on the readout. "I'm afraid we're trapped!"

Go to Section 73.

98.

“The world ain’t black and white, kid,” says Kevin. “People don’t fit in little squares.”

“Yeah, and I don’t have, like, a horse’s head or whatever,” Terry adds.

“It’s just a game,” you say, “I know it’s not real life.”

“You got that right,” Kevin says, and Terry nods. “*This*--this is real. It was probably pretty real when that dead dude in the creek met the Dragon.”

“Dragon?”

“He’s the leader of the Wings. This ain’t the first guy he’s killed, neither. I heard he did two dudes at once. Just knocked their heads together and cracked ‘em like eggs. *Bam!*”

That sounds kind of scary; you wonder if Kevin is just making up stories to sound tough.

“Where do you get all this stuff?” Terry asks.

“Hey, I hear a lot at my job!”

“You stock shelves at the grocery store!”

“You’d be surprised how much goes down there,” Kevin says, sounding hurt. “Anyway, we’re here.”

Go to Section 64.

99.

You’ve never been in a fight before, but your reading on the ancient hand-to-hand combat techniques of the Aresians gives you some idea of what to expect. Sure enough, when Dragon lunges at you, you recognize it instantly as a variant of what the Aresians called the “Strike from the Shadows,” and you’re ready to counter it with the “Sunlight Open Palm.”

Likewise, Dragon’s one-two punch (“Yes and No Combined,” to the Aresians) is easily countered by your “Reconciliation of Opposites.” Move after move, Dragon’s attacks are neutralized or turned against him by the power of Aresian Kung Fu.

Soon, he is at your mercy. “Uncle! Uncle!” he cries as you stand over him, and you can see by the looks on the Wings’ faces that he’ll never have any street cred again. After you perform the unlocking

sequence on his aura so that he can move again, he slinks away, unable to even look you in the eye.

A strange, short figure in wizard robes steps forward. “Well done, young one!” he says, and the gang members back away from this strange character. “You have taken the lessons of Ares to heart, and been tested in battle. Your quest is over. But, if you are brave, there is an even greater challenge!”

Go to Section 1, this time reading every third word, to begin the second quest!

100.

The grand coronation ceremony is the most incredible spectacle you have ever seen. The Aresian city has been rebuilt and shines with all its former glory. Crowds of grateful citizens throng the streets just to catch a glimpse of you as the parade goes by.

You are taken up the golden stairs of the Palace of Ares. You march down an enormous vaulted corridor, flanked by the bravest warriors of the Legendary Wings. There, Ares stands with his beautiful daughter or handsome son; he places his crown on your head.

Now you are the new Ares, King or Queen of War. You step forward and take the hand of his son or daughter, and...let's cut the crap, okay? You're a boy, right? Only boys read this stuff. Anyway, you kiss the girl, and now you're the King.

Congratulations! Your victory is now part of the history...the legend...of the Legendary Wings!

THE END

101.

You look up, and the transformation Kevin has undergone is shocking. His flesh has taken on a waxy, plastic appearance, and beneath it a skeletal, metallic frame is visible. “Kevin! You’re a robot!”

“Yes,” he confirms, his human side struggling to overcome his programming. “I have been a robot all along, and now that I am here, my prime directive has been activated.”

“But...why!?”

“Dark created me to infiltrate the humans and bring their champion here, so you would be trapped!”

He raises his palm to blast you. In the split second you have to react, you notice a big red button in front of you: it must be a self-destruct button!

If you fire your blaster at Kevin first, go to Section 86.

If you hit the self-destruct button, go to Section 97.

If you try to convince Kevin not to blast you, go to Section 69.

102.

You awaken in your own bed at home. You look out the window and hear chirping birds and the bustle of everyday life. What a dream you had! It was so vivid, you could have sworn it was real. You get up and walk outside; everything looks as you remember, but something feels off.

A nagging worry in your gut tells you to be careful; the battle against Dark wasn’t over when you left it. How long will it be before it arrives in your world?

THE END

...OR IS IT?

103.

With Kevin's help, you're able to continue where you left off, removing the energon cubes that control Dark's thought processes. "CEASE...OPER-R-RAAAA..."

The robotic voice of Dark fades out as you pull the last cube.

"We did it!" you exclaim.

Suddenly, the command center is engulfed in darkness. A shaft of light above you pierces the gloom and the two of you are lifted into the air. You alight on a platform surrounded by darkness; something gleams in the distance.

Booming, metallic laughter rings through the cavernous space. "FOOLISH HUMANIDS...YOU HAVE ONLY DISABLED DARK CONTAINMENT PROTOCOLS...AT LAST I AM FREE..."

"I guess we're not finished yet," Kevin says. "Whatever happens, it has been an honor to fight by your side."

You agree. From the darkness emerges a giant complex of chrome and glass.

At last, you stand before Dark, the massive Aresian supercomputer that has caused so much turmoil. You had no idea the description of Dark as an "artificial brain" was so literal: it's a huge, pulsating mass of wrinkled gray matter encased in gleaming protective armor, hovering in empty space. Awe and revulsion compete to overtake you, but Dark doesn't give you much time for reflection. Its booster rockets fire and suddenly it's coming at you! Dark fires its laser cannons. Prepare for battle!

Go to Section 81.

104.

“You know,” you say to Kevin, “with this giant moving statue, we could go *anywhere*.”

“You mean...leave the land of Ares?” he says.

“Why not? Dark is trapped in its body. If we take it away with us, the land will be safe, and we could use it for good...as it was meant to be.”

“I guess you’re right. That does sound pretty exciting.”

“Dark?” you say into the communicator, “are you listening?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

“This is our offer. Come with us and use your powers for the good of the world.”

“ALTERNATIVE?”

“We’ll pitch this stone body into a canyon, destroying you along with it.” There is silence. “Well?”

“CALCULATING...CALCULATING...CALCULATING...”

At last the computer speaks.

“PROPOSAL ACCEPTED.”

And that’s it. You and Kevin guide the giant statue away from the land of Ares. You explore many new places, making new friends, sometimes solving mysteries with the aid of the robotic brain, but always moving on, never letting the statue’s enormous feet rest in one place for too long.

THE END

...OR THE BEGINNING?

105.

You might be able to get out before the whole place collapses. Opening the steel door, you're forced to fight your way through the same kinds of gross worms and robotic crab monsters you've already fought, all doubly desperate now because they know they won't survive in the sunlight.

The pillars of the great hall begin to creak and groan under the strain. Soon cracks appear; dust and splintered tile falls from the ceiling. A growing rumble fills the space with noise.

"This way!" you shout, seeing daylight spill through a widening crack in the wall. Just as they expected, Dark's minions writhe and die as the sunlight invades their realm. For you, however, the fresh air and light are just what you need.

You and Kevin make it into the open sky just as the complex explodes in an enormous fireball. Only a smoking crater is left.

"Nothing could have survived that," Kevin says.

"Let's hope so," you answer.

Go to Section 84.

106.

After some transition time, you get used to living with Dr. LeCygne. Since the publication of his book and the beginning of his lecture tours, he's been able to move into a very comfortable house with a bedroom for you and plenty of space for him to display his museum-quality collection of Aresian artifacts.

While on tour you act as his assistant and perform "errands" for him. Sometimes, between tour dates, you'll pull out your Nintendo Entertainment System™ and play a game or two of *Legendary Wings*, and the two of you will laugh at all of the historical inaccuracies.

Sure, sometimes you miss your parents, but it's not a bad life at all that Dr. LeCygne has provided for you. You just hope you can live up to your end of the bargain.

THE END

107.

“I have a confession to make,” you say hesitantly.

You tell Kevin about the dead warrior you found in the lake, and how you took the key from its grasp. You feel terrible that you didn’t tell him about it, and you’re not even sure why you hid it. You feel ashamed.

Tears stream down Kevin’s face, but he smiles at you. “That skeleton...it must have been Michelle.” The way he says the name, you can tell she was important to him. “She was a fellow warrior...and my betrothed. She undertook a mission to infiltrate this base, but she never returned. We assumed she had been killed somewhere inside. It looks like she got much further than we believed, far enough to steal the key to the command module. She must have been on her way back to deliver it when she was struck down!”

“I’m sorry,” you say. It sounds feeble, but it’s all you can think to say.

“Don’t be.” Kevin breathes deeply. “I must thank you. You’ve given me something precious. Michelle...my brave Michelle! Her death made a difference. It’s up to us to finish the job!”

Go to Section 92.

108.

“We have to be sure!” you tell Kevin, even as the command center shakes and crumbles.

Opening the steel door, you fight past all the ghosts of the enemies you slew earlier; they howl at you of the horror of their existence. The pillars of the great hall begin to creak and groan under the strain. Soon cracks appear; dust and splintered tile falls from the ceiling. A growing rumble fills the space with noise.

“This way!” you shout, heading toward the inner sanctum of the supercomputer that you observed on the command center’s video screens.

But faced with destruction, Dark has taken the initiative! As you round a corner, you are nearly run over by a huge armored vehicle; on top is a hemispherical glass dome, in which an enormous wrinkled brain pulses hideously!

A giant skylight opens above, and the robotic voice of Dark issues from a speaker on the front of the vehicle.

“FAREWELL HUMANOID...I RETURN TO DELTA BASE ON THE LUNAR SURFACE...BUT I LEAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU TO ACCESS MEMORY OF ME...”

At those words, a panel slides open and particles of Dark’s brain matter fly toward you. Before they strike you, you witness Dark’s armored transport fire its booster rockets and launch from the opening into the sky above.

Go to Section 75.

109.

“There are still good men and women on the ground fighting for Ares,” you say. “With this, we could turn the tide of battle.” Kevin agrees, and under your control the giant statue lumbers back toward the fighting ground.

“WARNING...UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL...” the computer drones. You’ve gotten used to its impotent warnings and have mostly tuned it out.

Soon, you’re in the midst of the aerial battlefield, punching flying robots out of the sky. Their lasers bounce harmlessly off of the giant robot’s stone covering.

“Watch this,” you say, and the statue breathes a plume of smoke over the enemy forces. Disoriented, their instruments scrambled, they crash into the ground and one another. You and Kevin laugh heartily.

“HUMANOID...TELL THE TRUTH HUMANOID...” you hear the computer say.

What is it saying? A look of doubt crosses Kevin’s face.

“Explain,” you command the computer.

“THE KEY IS...ERROR...THE KEY IS...” Kevin’s face is twisted in sorrow. Dark must mean the key you found on the skeleton in the water! But what does it mean?

“THE KEY...” Dark drones on.

You swallow hard; the world slows down, even as you’re surrounded by automated flying death.

“I have to tell you something,” you say to Kevin, at almost the same time he says the same thing.

“You go first,” you both say almost simultaneously

If you tell Kevin where you found the key, go to Section 107.

If you have Kevin go first, go to Section 91.

110.

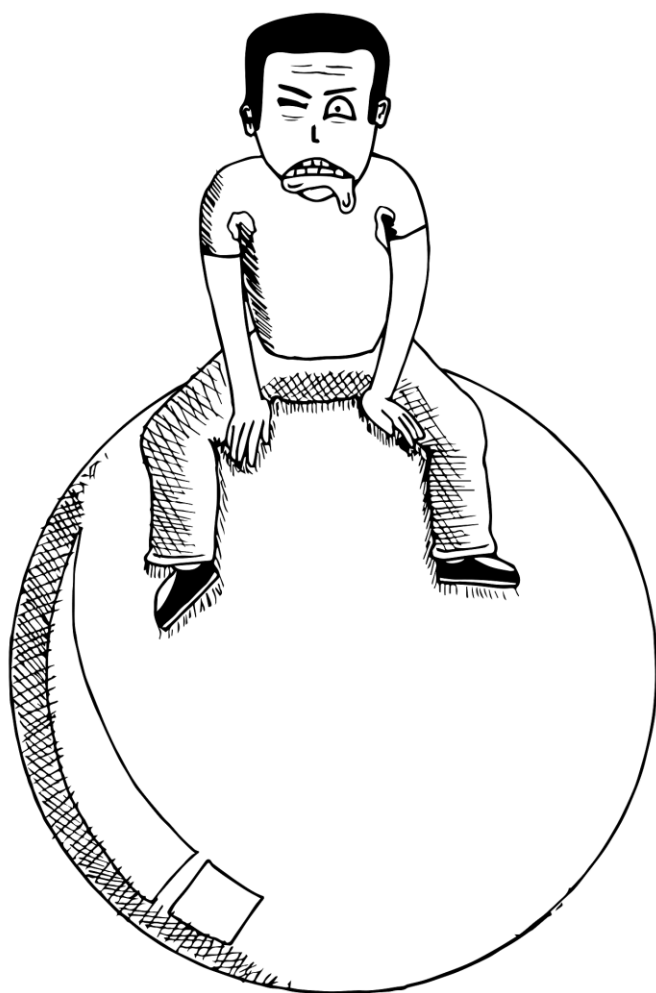
After a brief moment of unconsciousness, you stand and find yourself in a bare arena. Half of the sky is dark; the other half has the glassy reflection and curvature of an enormous dome.

Wait...it's a giant television screen! You're on the inside, and on the outside are Kevin and Terry, so gigantic compared to you that they fill the sky/screen. They have game controllers in their hands and they are peering at you intently. Every time one of them presses a button, you move as if you are a puppet on a string.

"Well," says Kevin in a booming voice, "you said you wanted to be *in the game!*"

The two giants laugh and laugh.

THE END



MARBLE MADNESS

by James Lawless

Chapter 1

Paul Bearing was a regular kid, with a regular life. He had regular parents, in a regular house, in a regular town. He went to a regular third-grade class, in a regular school on regular days, and played regular games with his regular friends. He was the sort of kid lots of other kids were friends with, got along with, and even saw themselves in.

Paul Bearing woke up to his alarm blaring. He got up out of his regular bed, on the regular side of his regular room, and prepared for what, he thought, would be another regular Wednesday.

It was, indeed, Wednesday. It was time to get up, to eat breakfast, get dressed, and head into school. He liked to get to school early on Wednesdays, not because he liked school all that much, or that he liked the French toast sticks they served for morning snack, but because Wednesday was the day he and his friends got together to play his favorite game: marbles!

Paul loved everything about marbles. He loved the feel of the marbles and the sound of them clacking together. He liked looking at them, seeing how they gleamed in the sunlight. He liked collecting marbles, finding a particular collection of marbles and then getting all of them. He enjoyed the hunt for new marbles. He loved going to all of the hobby shops in the area and looking through the marbles they had, trying to find one he wants, either to fill out a collection or complement the marbles in a set he already had.

He loved the game of marbles. He liked lining up the shots. He really liked how the games unfolded. The strategies, the manipulation of the marbles and the playing field, and the thrill of victory. But there was more to it than that. There was something about the motion of the marbles around the ring that reminded him of the unit in science class where they learned about stars and planets and their movement through space. He also learned, in a different unit, about atoms. Even though we can't see them, atoms are running around inside of normal, everyday objects, also zipping about, here and there. Atoms are the smallest things

in the universe, but make up everything in the universe. Atoms even make up stars, the biggest things in the universe. Like atoms, stars are also constantly moving, at very high rates of speed throughout space. All of this was represented in the game of marbles. They moved about the playing ring differently every time, but how they moved affected the course of the game. Marbles, like stars and atoms, which make up the biggest and smallest things in the entire universe, also have their own set of rules and movements. Marbles are like a tiny little snapshot of the stars, or a blown up snapshot of atoms. Marbles represented their own little world, and he loved participating in that world, taking control of it, and, in the end, becoming its master!

And he almost always became the master. He was the best marbles player in school, and everyone knew it. It's not to say he never lost. Sometimes one of his classmates has a good day, and perhaps he had a bad one. Or the marbles roll oddly that day, or the stars and the atoms in the universe have a different plan in mind. But when he does lose, he can usually count on winning the rematch. There is no one in school he hasn't beaten, and he was most proud of that. So his reputation as the best marbles player in school was secure. Even kids in other schools in other towns knew who he was. Kids came from several towns away to play marbles against him. Far and wide, people knew of Paul Bearing, and his impressive skill with marbles!

Chapter 2

Paul got out of bed and got his things together to get ready for school. He picked up his bag of marbles. He had to add two more marbles to his bag, to make up for the ones he lost the previous day. Markie Mudd, the school bully, had challenged him to a match at recess. As the best marbles player in school, he had to accept. There was no real threat of losing. Markie wasn't very good at marbles. He didn't even have good marbles. He only had the cheap ones his mom bought from the grocery store, instead of the good ones from the hobby shop.

The game had gone well. Paul won the match quite easily, capturing nine of Markie's marbles, while only losing two of his own. Since it was a challenge, instead of a friendly game, each player kept the marbles they won from the other player.

"Haha," yelled Markie, "I got your precious marbles!"

"So," Paul answered, "I got more of yours, so I win!"

"Yeah," answered Markie, defiantly, "but those are just cheap ones from the grocery store. Yours are fancy ones from the hobby shop. And now they're mine, and I can do what I want with them!"

With that, Markie took out a small hammer he had concealed in his pocket. Before anyone could stop him, he smashed Paul's two poor marbles into tiny pieces. It started to rain after recess. All Paul could think of was those little bits of smashed-up marble out there in the rain, alone and unprotected.

"Stupid Markie Mudd," Paul thought, as he put his marblebag into his backpack. "I'll find some way to get him back!"

Markie had not gotten any of Paul's favorite marbles, though. Those were his Young Adult Monster Dinosaurs collection. He had been collecting those for over a year. He had just found the last one, Brontosaurus Brent, the previous week in one of the nearby hobby shops. He was so happy to complete the set! He loved laying them out on his floor, and then looking at them all.

Two days ago he was using them to practice shots on the floor of his room. He left them, because he didn't want to risk having something happen to them at school. But when he got home, he noticed his mom had cleaned his room. His Young Adult Monster Dinosaurs marbles were on his desk, but some of them were missing!

"Mom?" Paul asked panickedly. "Where are the rest of my marbles?"

"Oh, is that not all of them?" his mom replied offhandedly. "I thought I got all of them off the floor before I vacuumed. Are you sure they're not under your dresser or bed somewhere?"

Paul made a thorough search of his bedroom. No luck. The areas under his bed, bookshelf, dresser and desk were all free from runaway marbles.

"I'm so sorry Paul," said his mom, comfortingly. "I tried to pick them all up before I vacuumed. But I guess some of them got sucked up by the vacuum cleaner."

Paul couldn't believe it. He had worked so hard to get all those marbles. Now some of them were gone, and his collection was once again incomplete.

Chapter 3

It was everything Paul could do not to think of his poor, lost marbles.

“How terrified they must be!” Paul cried. One moment, they’re on the floor (a marble’s natural habitat) playing with their other marble friends. Then, a great, loud noise falls over them and their whole world disappears. What is that like for them? Covered in dirt, chocked with dust, and surrounded by darkness, they were now trapped, for all time, inside the vacuum cleaner bag. Can they even understand where they were or what had happened? Would the lost marbles be able to find each other inside the vacuum cleaner, or would they simply hang in the void until the end of time?

What about those marbles that were left behind? How must they feel? They, too, were snatched away from their homes, and placed high up on the desk. Marbles don’t belong on desks. Everyone knows that! They roll around until they fall off, back down to the floor—*ouch!* Paul’s mom had trapped them on the desk with two rulers and a picture frame, to prevent them from returning to their homes. Sure, they were safe from the vacuum, but they must have been so scared!

Do the survivors notice their friends are missing? Of course they do. They have to! Sure, they’re just marbles, but marbles know these things. Marbles are smarter than people realize. Oftentimes, when you’re lining up a shot, the marble tells you what shot to make, how to make it, where to make it from. The marble can tell you whether or not a shot is possible, if you know how to listen. The marbles know how to listen, too, if you know how to talk to them. If you tell your marble what shot to take, it will work out the shot for you. The marbles know what situations they’re in, and know where the marbles are on the field. So, of course, they know when their friends have been snatched away.

Certainly Paul would notice if he got to school one day to discover his best friend in the world, Sam Stone, had suddenly disappeared off the face of the Earth. He would also be worried sick! Paul

and Sam met on the first day of first grade, and became fast friends. It was Sam Stone who introduced Paul to the game of marbles. Sam had Paul's same deep love of the game, though Sam didn't have Paul's "feel," which allowed him to have such a high level of success at marbles. Sure, Sam had a much deeper knowledge of the rules, strategies, and history of the game than Paul, but when it came time to shoot, Paul was just plain better at making the shots.

If Paul got to school one day, and discovered his best friend Sam was missing, and no one knew where he was, he'd be very upset! And while he could go make new friends, none of them would ever be able to replace his lost, best friend Sam. So imagine how his poor marbles must feel. Sure, they would continue on with their regular lives, getting shot around on fields or on Paul's floor, but there must be some gap in their lives that Paul's new marbles just won't be able to fill.

Paul, too, would try to move on. But he, too, would have a gap in his life that new marbles would not be able to fill. He was very sad.

Chapter 4

Paul gathered his things and went down to eat breakfast. He ate in silence. He didn't want to talk to his mom because he was still mad about her vacuuming up his marbles. After he finished his breakfast, Paul began his walk to school.

It had rained yesterday, and the air was still thick with and smelled like rain. Paul hated the rain. He hated how it made everyone stay inside. Paul liked playing marbles on the floor in his room, but there wasn't enough space to play with a friend on his bedroom floor. He'd be perfectly happy to play marbles outside in the rain, but his mom always yelled at him every time he tried.

Also, when it rained, all the kids at school had to play inside. This, too, prevented Paul from playing marbles, either before school or at recess. The teachers always got upset when Paul and his friends tried to play on the floor of the classroom.

"It's not safe," the teacher would always say. "Somebody could slip on one of your marbles and fall."

"Why does that mean we can't play?" Paul would answer. "Maybe the other kids should watch where they walk."

But it would never work. And they would spend recess looking at marbles, or talking about plays and strategy, instead of actually playing the game.

The rain storm isn't even the worst part. The rain messed things up for a long time after the rain had stopped. For one, it made the ground really muddy, which was terrible for playing marbles. You need a hard surface to play marbles on, so that the marbles can roll. If the ground is muddy, the marbles get stuck and can't roll. For that reason, the kids would be playing marbles on the sidewalk today. It's not the same as when they played on the field. The feel wasn't the same, and the marbles bounced differently. It just wasn't as much fun.

The rain also brought about something else he really didn't like: worms. He hated worms. They were gross and slimy, and wiggled about on the sidewalk. This means that when they played marbles on the sidewalk, the worms were usually in the way, getting their gross sliminess all over the marbles. Not to mention having to shoot around them all the time messed up shots, and completely changed the game. Paul didn't like that at all.

Altogether, everything was wrong with the rain. And Paul had to walk the whole way to school, stepping over worms and trying to avoid getting mud on his shoes. The whole walk to school he had the smell of the rain in the air to remind him of all the reasons he hated the rain. The smell also reminded him that it was going to be too wet to play marbles on the field today, and that, along with the loss of his marbles, made him very sad.

Chapter 5

Paul arrived at the schoolyard, where his friends were all waiting for him. There were a few kids there who were new to their marble circle. Sam Stone was in the process of explaining the rules of the game of marbles to them. Markie was hanging around, too, clearly still smarting from the previous day's loss.

"Welcome back, Markie," yelled Paul. "Here to impress us with more of your Marble Badness?"

"Shut up, Bearing," Markie Mudd answered. "You're just mad 'cause I broke your marbles yesterday."

Paul was mad, but he didn't want to admit it.

"Not at all," said Paul, denyingly. "If anything, I'm just annoyed that none of your cheap, junky grocery store marbles fit into any of my sets."

"Shut up, Bearing," said Markie Mudd. "We can have a rematch any time you'd like."

"I'd love to," Paul answered, "but unless your mommy bought you more marbles since yesterday, you don't have enough marbles for a regulation marbles set."

It was true. Markie had exactly enough marbles to play last time. With the marbles Paul won, Markie Mudd no longer had enough to play. All of the kids knew it, and they all laughed at him, even the new kids.

"Shut up!" Markie yelled, first at Paul, and then at all the other kids. "Shut up, Shut up!" Markie stomped away. He stomped up to another kid nearby, and demanded he give up his lunch money. The kid just rolled his eyes and went back to playing tag with his friends. Markie, absolutely frustrated, stomped inside and ducked into a bathroom.

Paul and his friends went back to their marbles games. Two of the new kids were playing a friendly game. Two of the regulars were teaching them, and giving hints. Sam Stone and Paul started to talk.

“Hey man,” said Sam, to Paul. “Good to see you. How are you?”

“Not bad,” Paul answered Sam. “How about you?”

“I’m good,” said Sam, back to Paul. “That was a good one you pulled on Markie Mudd. You really stuck it to him.”

“Haha, yeah, I sure did. I didn’t feel like putting up with his stuff today. It’s been a bad week for my marbles. Between him yesterday and my mom the day before.”

“Yeah, that’s a shame about your mom and your marbles. You’d think marbles would be safe at home. I guess you never know when someone’s gonna come by with a vacuum cleaner and snatch up some of your marbles.”

“Or a hammer.”

“Oh, I know, right? What was Markie thinking? Who just smashes another man’s marbles? And right in front of him. I wish I had seen him pull out a hammer, I’d have tried to stop him.”

“Yeah, I know. I would have, too. I was just shocked.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry man.”

“It’s cool. Can’t do anything about it. Just gotta move on, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

The new kids playing marbles finished their game. The two kids helping them started their own game, to show the new kids what a real game looked like, though they continued to instruct the new kids about the rules and strategies, and some of the finer points of shot-making.

Paul and Sam’s conversation moved on to their own marble collections.

“So, Paul,” said Sam, getting ready to ask Paul which marbles he’d brought with him that day, “which marbles did you bring with you today?”

“I brought my Blue set with me today.”

“Oh cool. May I see them?”

Paul took out his marble bag. He was rather proud of this set of marbles. It was the set he generally took with him when he was traveling, or otherwise out in public. If any of them were lost, they were easy enough to replace without breaking the set. And the color schemes of

blue marbles lent themselves to nice blending. One marble might be the same blue as another marble, but have a strip that matches a third, thus combining the three in a beautiful harmony. Another might be clear with two blue stripes through the middle, combining it with some others. Some might have a certain sparkle to them that connects them to others. Most of the marbles could be connected in some way. And even the ones that didn't have a variety of blues as their base colors still looked absolutely beautiful when held in a hand or laid out inside of the marbles circle. They felt good to hold and were stunning to look at. It was a good set of marbles.

"These are great marbles," Sam said. "They are high-quality marbles. And they look great. It's a good set. I have my Shapes set today. It's all my clear ones with shapes in them. Circles, and squares and stuff. They're not all artsy or anything, or pretty like yours. But, you know, they're mine, and it's nice to have a full set, you know."

"Yeah, I know," answered Paul, suddenly finding himself thinking about his Young Adult Monster Dinosaurs marbles. He liked having the full set, for the very brief period he had them, before his mom sucked them up in her vacuum cleaner. "It's fun to have a full set."

With that, the bell rang, telling all the kids it was time to head into school. The kids playing marbles gathered up their marbles and headed inside. The new kids followed them, chatting about the new game they'd been turned on to. Clearly, some new, lasting friendships had been formed this morning, because of the game of marbles.

"That's the bell," said Sam. "I'm going to head on in."

"You go ahead," answered Paul.

"You going to do your thing?" asked Sam.

"Yeah. I'll be in in a little bit."

"Yeah, that's cool. See you inside."

"Yeah."

Chapter 6

It was time for school. As the bell rang, all the kids lined up to go inside. Paul was still putting away his marbles, and all the kids left to go inside. Paul liked staying at the marble ring a little longer than everyone else. He liked having a little alone time with the ring. Paul liked having a moment to himself to commune with the ground. To stand in the ring, for a moment of silence, for a quiet pause, to organize his thoughts and get him ready for the day. But this time, when he opened his eyes, he found himself inside a ring of brilliant, white light. He looked up, but could see nothing but light. When he looked down he saw the ground he had been standing on, but the light was coming out of the marbles ring.

“What’s going on here?” Paul yelled into the light. “Am I dying? Am I being abducted by aliens? Sucked up by a giant vacuum cleaner?”

“That’s new,” said a voice from beyond a light. “Everyone says the first two, but I’ve never heard ‘sucked up by a vacuum cleaner’ before.”

“I’ve had an odd week, what do you want? And who are you?”

“I’ll reveal myself shortly. The transfer is almost complete.”

“Transfer? Where are you taking me?”

“You will see shortly.”

“When?”

“Well, how about now?”

“Now?”

“Yes...now.”

With that, the ring of light dropped away, and he was now surrounded by darkness.

“So it was a vacuum cleaner.” Paul said.

“No, Paul, it was a dimensional transfer. You’re in our world, now!”

“How do you know my name?”

“We’ve been watching you for a while now, Paul. We’ve watched you grow into one of the best marbles players on Earth.”

“Who are you? You still haven’t told me!”

Then, out of the darkness, a wand appeared. The end began to glow, and in the light, Paul was able to see a face. It was the face of a woman. She was beautiful.

“My name is Wizard,” Wizard said. “I have brought you to my world so that you can save us.”

“Save you? From what?”

“A great darkness that threatens to swallow our entire world. I have brought you here because we need your expertise.”

“Expertise? I’m just a kid. What can I possibly do to help?”

“Allow me to show you,” said Wizard. “Let me introduce you...to the MARBLE WORLD!”

Chapter 7

The darkness fell away from Paul, and he saw an entire world of marbles. Paul was in the air, with Wizard, floating high above. Below him was a world with hills, valleys, plains and mountains, rivers and forests, cities and farms. And all around him, there were marbles zipping about all over the place.

“Where am I?” Paul asked, expectantly.

“This is our home,” answered Wizard. “This is the Marble World. A world filled with marbles. Here all kinds of marbles live, work, and play in perfect happiness and harmony. Here, there is no pain, or sadness, war or bullying. Only endless mountains and meadows for marbles to run on.”

“It looks like a really great world. Why, I bet there’s no homework here, either.”

“Indeed, no. Marbles here are born with all the knowledge they’ll ever need. Everything here is perfect.”

“So what’s wrong?”

“It’s all about to end. A great darkness is coming. And it’s going to swallow this entire world.”

“Oh no!” yelled Paul, shockedly. “That’s really bad!”

“Indeed. That’s why we need your help.”

“But what can I do?”

“You can save us, Paul.”

“But how?”

“We need you to win a race.”

“A race? I don’t understand.”

“Every 1,000 years,” Wizard began, storytellingly, “The Great Darkness comes upon our land. At that time, a champion must emerge, and take up the challenge. If the champion is successful, our land is

assured of peace for another 1,000 years. If he fails, then all you see before you disappears forever.”

“Oh, my.”

“Yes. As you can see, this is a time of great concern and worry for our people. Some marble that would be able to stand as champion gets overwhelmed by the tremendous pressure of the task and become incapable of racing, or even moving. We call this, ‘The Madness.’ We need you, Paul. We need an outsider who can stand as champion for our people. We need you to run The Race, and defeat The Great Darkness, and save our World.”

“But, I’m not a marble!” Paul objected. “What good can I do?”

“You may not be a marble, Paul,” answered Wizard, “but you have the soul of a marble. It’s why you are such a fantastic marbles player in your world. You know how to *be* a marble. You know how to talk to marbles, and, most importantly, you know how to listen to them. It’s why you were chosen, Paul.”

“But I’m not a marble. How can I be the champion of the Marble World if I’m not a marble?”

“Oh, that’s easy enough. I can make you a marble. But I have to know you are willing to be our champion.”

“Become a marble?” said Paul, excitedly. “Absolutely, but how?”

“Oh Paul,” said Wizard, “That’s why they call me ‘Wizard.’”

Again, Wizard’s wand began to glow, and a beam of light emerged from it. Paul was encased in a huge ball of light. When the light disappeared, Paul found himself inside of a huge marble! Inside the marble, he was floating in a strange blue fluid, but he was able to breathe, and he wasn’t wet. He was strangely comfortable. Just below him was a chair, and some controls.

“What is this?” asked Paul. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve made you into a marble,” Wizard answered. “Well, I’ve *put* you into a marble anyway,” Wizard joked. “Actually turning you into a marble, well, that would be more difficult. Not to mention unethical.”

“What does that mean?” Paul asked, still unsure of what was going on.

“Oh, nevermind,” said Wizard. “Come, we have much to do. There isn’t much time before the race, and we still need to teach you how to control your marble.”

Chapter 8

Again, Wizard's wand shone, and Paul found himself transported to an empty, hilly area, where there were no other marbles to be seen.

"We can practice here," said Wizard. "Sit in the chair inside of your marble."

Paul did as he was told. He sat in the chair. Before him were two control rods.

"Place your hands on the two control rods there." Wizard said, instructively. Again, Paul did as he was told.

There was a control panel in front of him that lit up as he grabbed the controls.

"Good," said Wizard, approvingly. "You are now in control of your marble. The control rods are used to guide your marble. You'll figure out how to do that. All I can say is that you shouldn't try to force the marble. It's like when you set up to take a shot during a game of marbles. Let the marble tell you what to do. Just listen; the marble will tell you everything you need to know."

Paul began to manipulate the control rods. Accordingly, the marble began to move about.

"You're right!" Paul said, excitedly. "The controls are really easy. It's like the marble is telling me what to do!"

"It is," said Wizard, sagely. "You've always said, 'the marble will tell you what to do, if you know how to listen.' You're more right than you thought. Marbles *are* alive, and they *are* aware. It's why I chose you, Paul. You know how to listen. Too many adults have lost their ability to hear the quiet whisper or feel the subtle push of a tiny marble in their hand. Or they're too busy with their lives to take the time to play the game. And a lot of children are busy, too. And many of those who do play think too much, or try too hard to force the marbles to do what they want, instead of listening to what the marble wants. Your friend Sam spends too much time thinking about strategy and possibilities and

potential follow-up moves to hear that the marble has thought of all this already, and has already figured out the solution. But you, Paul,” continued Wizard, “you know all this. And the marbles know you know. You trust them, and they trust you, and that’s why you are so successful. And now we need you, Paul. We need you to save us from The Great Darkness.”

“You still haven’t told me what that is,” said Paul, who was starting to get the hang of moving his marble around.

“The world marbles live in is a practically perfect paradise. I, Wizard, keep watch over the marbles, and preserve the world with my magical power. But all this comes with a price. My magical protection can only last so long, and there are evil forces that want to destroy this beautiful paradise. Once every 100 years my protection fades, and The Great Darkness comes.”

“That’s awful!” cried Paul, who was getting better and better at controlling his marble.

“Yes, it is. But there is a rule. The darkness cannot take over if there is one champion marble who can complete the ultimate obstacle course within the allotted time. That’s why you are here, Paul. We need you to complete the course and save our world!”

“Is it hard?” asked Paul.

“It is very hard. The course is long, the way is difficult, and the time is short. The pressure of succeeding is enough to drive many marbles into The Madness. But worse than that, the course messes with your mind. It brings out your darkest fears and puts them all in front of you on the course. It is why you must be very careful not to give in to your fears. The Great Darkness knows what you fear most, and will put them all in front of you. Even if you don’t fall into The Madness, you only need to be distracted by your fears long enough for you to run out of time.”

“I understand,” said Paul, who had now mastered moving his marble all about.

“Good. Because if you fail to complete the course, the whole marble kingdom will be lost forever.”

“You mean, all marbles will disappear?”

“Yes Paul. All marbles in every dimension will disappear. The game you love, that has brought you so much fame, will be gone.”

“Then I must win. For the MARBLES!”

Chapter 9

The day of the race had come. A large, magical door appeared in the center of the town. The door opened, and inside, there was only darkness. Out of the darkness, a deep, evil voice boomed.

“Any who would wish to save their beloved marble world,” boomed the evil voice, “step forward...if you dare!”

All the marbles began to scream, and roll about in terror. They were all very scared. None of them knew what to do.

“I will go!” exclaimed Paul, from inside his marble. “I will be your champion! I will enter the race, and win it, to save all of you!”

None of the marbles actually heard Paul, but he confidently rolled up to the doorway.

“This is it, Paul,” Paul said to himself. “This is for all the marbles!” Paul then rolled through the door, and into the darkness.

In the darkness, Paul heard Wizard calling out to him.

“This is it Paul,” Wizard said to him. “This is what I brought you here to do. Remember all that I taught you. Remember also that you are now in the realm of The Great Darkness, and that I no longer have the power to help you. This is it, Paul. The fate of our entire world is in your hands! I wish you the very best of luck. May the winds always roll you favorably...”

The voice of Wizard faded out, and was replaced by the booming voice from before.

“So, you would stand to race for the future of your people?” asked the Voice. “What is your name, Player?”

“My name is Paul Bearing,” Paul Bearing yelled into the darkness.

“Indeed,” The voice answered from the darkness. “That is a good name for a marble.”

“And just who are you?” Paul demanded of the Voice.

“I,” began the Voice, “am The Great Darkness. I am what shall become of your world should you lose. Your world shall be swallowed up into what you see around you...endless, eternal darkness FOREVER! No light, no heat, no hope. No rolling about in endless, grassy fields below beautiful blue skies, lit up by your glorious, yellow sun. No, only an eternity in the void you see around you. “

“That would be very bad,” Paul thought to himself, silently. “If I lose, all of the marbles will be like the ones Mom sucked up in the vacuum cleaner. Lonely and sad and alone.

“So, Player, do you accept the challenge? Are you ready to begin the race to save your people?”

“You bet I am!” yelled Paul, defiantly. “Let’s ROLL!!”

Chapter 10

With that, Paul felt a dull thud against the outside of his marble. Paul's marble was now in the grip of a large crane, and was being carried along through the darkness, somewhere, but he couldn't see where he was going because it was so dark. He felt another thud as the crane put him down on something, but he still couldn't see what, because of the darkness.

"Are you ready to begin, Player?" The Great Darkness called out to Paul.

"You bet I am!" Paul yelled back.

"In that case," The Great Darkness announced, "Let's see how you fare against...THE BEGINNING STAGE!"

Suddenly there was light, and Paul could see the course in front of him. A timer appeared over the stage, and a similar one appeared on the control panel in front of Paul, inside of his marble.

"What is this?" Paul asked.

"That," explained The Great Darkness, "is the amount of time you have to finish the race. As you can see, it is not a lot of time. If you fail to complete the course before your timer reaches zero, then you lose the race. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do, thank you," Paul said, understandingly.

"Good," said The Great Darkness. "Then let us begin."

With that, a loud siren blared, the timer began to count down, and Paul's race began. Paul thought of all the marbles that were counting on him to save their world from The Great Darkness.

"I would hate to fail them," Paul thought to himself. "Sure, Wizard said nothing would happen to me, but all those marbles would get swallowed up in darkness. That would be a real shame."

Paul once again thought of his marbles that were vacuumed up by his mom. He would hate to be the reason so many more marbles got sucked up by The Great Darkness's hungry vacuum. They would be so scared, cold, and alone, just like his own lost marbles.

Paul looked out over the course before him. The Beginning Course was laid out on a blue grid. The grid sloped down and away from Paul. There were many obstacles in his way, which kept him from seeing what was coming up later in the course. Not to mention he would have to spend time moving around and through all those obstacles. Time that was all too quickly winding down for him.

The first part of the course had several wide columns that Paul had to roll between. After the columns, he came upon another marble. This marble was about the same size as Paul's marble, but was a solid black, unlike Paul's own blue marble. Paul tried to move around this marble, but every time he did, the marble would block his path.

"What's going on?" Paul wondered. "Why is this marble trying to stop me?"

Paul looked at the Black Marble, and realized there was a person inside. He was shocked when he realized who it was.

"It's Markie Mudd!" Paul exclaimed. "Markie, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to stop you, Bearing!" Markie answered.

"But, if you do that, then all the marbles in the marble kingdom will fall into The Great Darkness!"

"Yeah," answered Markie. "You'll have really lost your marbles! And I'm going to smash all of them to little pieces with a hammer!"

"No you won't," Paul yelled back, "cause I'm going to stop you!" With that, Paul slammed his marble into the Black Marble as hard as he could. This knocked the Black Marble back a bit, but then the Black Marble slammed into Paul's even harder. Paul hit back, and then the Black Marble. The two marbles clashed again and again until Paul heard the voice of Wizard in his head.

"Paul, you have to stop this!" Wizard said. "That's not really Markie Mudd in there! It's one of The Great Darkness's illusions!"

"But that's Markie Mudd!" said Paul, objectioningly. "I saw him! He said he was going to help The Great Darkness win and then smash all the marbles to pieces with a hammer!"

"No Paul," corrected Wizard, "look again."

Paul looked again and saw the Black Marble was just a plain, empty, regular marble.

“Oh no,” said Paul. “I thought that was Markie Mudd in there! I’ve wasted all this time trying to ram him off the edge of the course!”

With that, Paul slipped past the Black Marble and headed down the long winding path to the next part of the stage. Thankfully, the Black Marble did not chase him.

“That’s going to happen a lot here. You are in The Great Darkness’s world, now. He’s going to use your hatred, fear, and other negative emotions against you. Whatever he can do to delay you, or distract you, he will do, to keep you from finishing the race in time. You have to be strong, Paul, to see through his tricks, if you are to have any hope of finishing this race and saving the marble kingdom.”

“Can’t you do something?” Paul asked. “Maybe you could use your magic to show me what’s real and what isn’t?”

“This is ‘The Great Darkness’s world, Paul,” answered Wizard. “My power is greatly reduced here. You have to get through this on your own.”

“But isn’t there anything you can do to help?” Paul pleaded.

“Well, I guess I could try this...”

With that, Paul saw Wizard’s staff appear, and begin to glow. It touched Paul’s marble, and, suddenly, the timer showed a little more time on it!

“That’s the best I can do, Paul,” Wizard said. “The rest is up to you!”

“Thanks!” exclaimed Paul. At that, he came to the end of the winding path, to the next part of the course.

Chapter 11

The next part of the Beginning Stage was a wide, flat area. It was connected to another part of the stage by a drawbridge that was up, but slowly lowering.

“That’s odd,” Paul said to himself. “Well, nothing to do but wait for it to come down, I guess.”

But as soon as he said that, there appeared, from out of nowhere, a half-dozen Giant Worms! They were like the worms he saw on the sidewalk after a rainstorm, but giant-sized. They were big enough to swallow his marble whole, and they very quickly started trying to do so! Paul managed to dodge out of the way. These worms were just as gross and slimy as the ones in his world.

They kept trying to eat Paul’s marble. Each time they would try, they would leap high in the air and try to come down mouth-first on top of Paul. He managed to keep dodging their hungry mouths. But there were so many worms coming after him that he did not have much room to dodge. And every time a worm would fall on the empty space Paul’s marble used to occupy, the spot would be covered in worm slime. It was totally gross. When Paul accidentally rolled over one of those spots, some of the slime stuck to his marble, and slowed him down a good bit.

After what felt like a long time of dodging the worms, Paul noticed that the drawbridge had lowered. But by time he saw it, he was a long way away from it, and there were a lot of worms in his way. He began trying to weave his way through them. He would dart under them when they leapt in the air to try to eat him.

The draw bridge was starting to raise again when Paul finally got to it, but he had enough speed built up to push the marble onto the bridge. Some of the worms tried to leap onto the bridge, but the bridge was rising fast enough that the worms weren’t able to reach it. Again, Paul had gotten through the obstacle safely. He rolled off the other side of the drawbridge and continued down the path.

“Oh man, I hate worms,” Paul said to himself. “I guess that’s what Wizard meant by The Great Darkness will use my fears against me.’ The Great Darkness must know me really well to use worms against me. ‘Cause those things are totally gross. Especially when they’re so huge they can jump into the air.”

After the drawbridge, Paul rolled down a short path and came to a large sheet of ice. There were several icicles jutting up out of the ice sheet, as well as several pits in the ice.

“I’m not going to be able to control myself on that ice,” Paul thought to himself. “If I run into one of those icicles I could bounce off and roll into one of those pits. And there’s no way I’m going to be able to roll out of there. What am I going to do?”

Paul looked around and noticed there was one straight path through the ice. One path over the sheet that he could get across without hitting any icicles or falling into the pits. But he would have to make sure he hit the ice sheet at the exact right place going in the exact right direction.

“It’s just like making a shot in marbles,” Paul thought. So, just like he did when playing marbles, Paul lined up his shot, took a breath, paused, and went for it. And just like when Paul was playing marbles, he hit his shot perfectly! He sailed across the ice sheet, avoiding all the icicles and pits making it safely to the path on the other side. The finish line was pretty close to the end of the ice sheet, and Paul rolled across it with plenty of time left on the timer.

“I made it!” Paul exclaimed. “I totally made it. I won!”

“Very good, Player,” said the voice of The Great Darkness, “But that was only the Beginning Stage. Let’s see how well you do against the next one!”

With that, the crane came down and picked up Paul’s marble. Paul, once again, found himself completely covered in darkness as the lights from the Beginning Stage faded away beneath him.

“I wonder what sort of surprises the next stage has in store,” Paul thought. He wouldn’t have to wait long, though, as the crane soon put him down, and the lights came up on Stage Two.

Chapter 12

“Now it is time for the SECOND STAGE!” yelled the voice of the Great Darkness. As with the beginning of the first stage, a sonorous siren sounded, signaling the Second Stage’s start.

Paul rolled his marble into a long, narrow hallway. He quickly discovered that the walls were made of rubber, and every time he nudged one of them, it bounced him back violently. Since all the walls were rubber, he bounced off one wall directly into another, so it took him some time to regain control of his marble. He had to go very slowly and carefully down the corridor.

When he came to the end of the hallway, he looked down to see the floor was all dirt, with several large mud puddles in it. But they weren’t just regular mud puddles. These were moving!

The mud puddles were actually moving around on the floor. Back-and-forth, front-and-back, here-and-there. Paul didn’t see how he was going to get past them. And if he fell into one, Paul didn’t see how he would be able to roll his way out.

Time was ticking away, so Paul had no choice but to roll down the ramp and start weaving his way through the puddles. He couldn’t see any pattern to how the puddles were moving, but at least they didn’t seem to be hunting Paul down, so he had some room to move. He kept trying to move forward, but pushed left or right or backwards when he saw a mud puddle at him.

Paul had one pretty serious scare by time he got across. There was a mud puddle coming directly at him from his left, but there was no room forward or backward for him to move, because of other mud puddles. He had no room to roll but to his right. He did so, but only had so much room to roll to his right before he got to the edge of the platform. Paul moved as close to the edge as he could, even with part of his marble hanging over the edge, but, fortunately, the mud puddle coming at him turned and moved into a different direction, so Paul could move away down the edge to safety.

Once Paul got past the dirt floor with all of the moving mud puddles, he came to a pipe in the floor at the end of the path. Paul didn't like the idea of rolling into a hole in the floor. He didn't know where it was going to take him, or if it would just drop him into a trap that he would not be able to escape before time expired. Paul looked around, but did not see any other way to go, so he rolled into the pipe.

Thankfully, it did not lead into a trap, but to the next part of the stage. Paul rolled down a ramp, and saw the next obstacle.

There was a long ribbon, and waves were moving down the ribbon. Paul saw that he had to roll on the ribbon, in between the waves, and roll off the ribbon further down onto a very narrow platform on the other side. That platform was very close to the finish line for the stage, but the waves moved very fast, and were very close together, and Paul was having a hard time getting the timing of the waves down.

Paul was trying to figure out when to go, but every time he decided to go, he could feel the marble resisting his movements. It was the same resistance he would get when he was attempting a bad shot in a game of marbles. Any time he tried to make a tricky shot, and decided to just go for it without thinking the shot through, he could feel the marble resisting him. Paul figured out early that this was the marble's way of telling him to take a different shot. Paul knew to listen to the marble. He would close his eyes, clear his mind, and let the marble guide him.

He did the same here. He closed his eyes, and cleared his mind. He waited for a second, and then he heard the voice of Wizard.

"You looked all around for another path to keep from going down that pipe." Wizard said. "Why don't you do the same thing here?"

Paul opened his eyes, and looked around. Sure enough, there was another path directly behind him. It was long, winding, narrow, and didn't have any walls to keep him from falling, but it looked safer than taking the chance on the waves of that ribbon. So Paul crept down the other path, going slowly, and carefully. It didn't take too much time to get through it, but at the end of the path, there was a long, steep ramp to climb. Paul didn't have any room to take a running start, and he could not force the marble up the ramp, because of how steep it was.

"How am I going to get up this ramp?" Paul wondered. "It's too steep. I can't make it up!"

"Use your turbo button," said Wizard, instructingly. "There's a button on your control console. Press it, and the marble will roll much faster, and allow you to get up this hill."

Sure enough, there was a button on the console. Paul pressed it, and his marble moved much faster. He could easily roll up the steep hill now, and across the finish line.

“Wow. I’m glad to find out about that turbo button,” Paul thought. “That will really come in handy later, I can tell!”

With that, the crane once again came down and lifted Paul’s marble off the course, and on to the next. Once again, Paul was surrounded by the darkness.

Chapter 13

“And now, Player, welcome to Stage 3: The AERIAL ROUND!” The lights came up, and Paul saw he was atop a very high ramp.

“Oh my, I’m very high up!” Paul yelled worriedly.

The starting horn sounded, and Paul’s marble was dropped down the ramp. WHOOOOSH! Down it went. At the bottom of the ramp, Paul shot onto the stage at a very high speed. So fast, in fact, he barely regained control of the marble before he was toppling off the edge of the stage, into the abyss below.

“That was very close,” said Paul, glad to be back in control of the marble which had become his home.

With that, he began to work his way down the long, winding path of the stage. He wound through the path left, and right, and left again, before coming to the first obstacle. And it was a doozy.

He heard it before he even saw it, the telltale WHIIIIIIIRRRs of vacuum cleaners.

“Of course there would be vacuums,” Paul thought. “A marble’s natural enemy.”

He was still mad about all the marbles he lost when his mom vacuumed his room. “Why, I bet she’s the one running this thing. Nothing makes her happier than when she’s sucking up all those poor, innocent, defenseless marbles. I’m still mad at her for that.”

It seemed like only yesterday when she did the unspeakable act of cleaning his room. In fact, it was yesterday!

“If you wouldn’t leave your room in such a mess, I wouldn’t have to clean it for you!” she said, accusingly.

“I’ll show you, Mom!” Paul yelled from inside his own marble, “This is one stone you can’t vacuum up!”

That was scary, but he made it through. The vacuums were all on his right, the path itself was very narrow, and the pull from the vacuums was really strong. He managed to avoid their pull by traveling down the left-most edge of the track, but this meant risking toppling over the edge at every moment, especially in the corners. He had to go slowly and carefully, so he lost a lot of time.

After the vacuums, the path came to a dead end. Or, rather, the path stopped, and continued on the other side of a long gap, with nothing but the deep, starry pit below, looking up at him.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Paul asked, questioningly. “Even with my turbo power, I have no hope of making that jump!”

Just then, he heard a loud hissing sound coming from beneath him. HSSSSSSSS, it went. Then a giant cylinder launched up from under him, throwing him really far into the air.

“WHOOOOOOAAAAAHH!” yelled Paul, surprised to find himself so far in the air, and so quickly. Looking down he could see the entire course in front of him. All the twists and turns, the giant ramp he came in on, and even those awful vacuums.

“They look so small from up here. Like I could just roll over them and crush them all!”

Also, while he was in the air, he noticed the rhythmic firing pattern of the cylinder.

“If I was rolling forward when that thing fired, it could launch me to the other side!” Paul exclaimed. So when he landed, he rolled off of the cylinder, waited for the pattern to repeat, and then hit his turbo and rolled forward again. The cylinder fired, and, sure enough, it launched him to the path on the other side, allowing him to continue.

Time was ticking down when he came to the final obstacles: the Hammers. If there was one thing Paul hated more than a vacuum cleaner, it was hammers. The one time Markie Mudd won a few of Paul’s marbles in a game, Markie smashed them to pieces with a hammer. He even left the pieces outside in the rain, just to rub it in.

He did it to be a jerk, too. Markie just wanted to get one of Paul’s marbles, so he could smash it with his hammer on the sidewalk. Paul was so mad. He had just gotten the last marble he needed to finish off his Young Adult Monster Dinosaurs collection. Markie had gotten his Tyrannosaurus Tim marble, his favorite. It was gone now, and there was nothing Paul could do about it.

He was thinking about his lost marble so long, he had lost all track of time. It wasn't until he heard Wizard calling him that he realized how long he had been sitting there.

"Paul, you have to go, now!" called Wizard. "There isn't much time left."

"Oh no, I forgot about the time!" Paul yelled, startledly. "I gotta ROLL!" He mashed the turbo button and flew through the hammers, finishing with just a little time left on the clock. But he had made it, and was through to the next stage. Paul caught his breath while the crane came down, grabbed his marble and carried it to the next stage.

Chapter 14

The crane placed Paul down on the next stage. When the lights came up, he saw that this stage was very different from the previous stages. Instead of being at the top of a ramp and rolling down to the end of the stage, for this one he was at the bottom of the stage, and would have to roll up the stage to get to the end.

“Now, Player,” said the voice of the Great Darkness once again, “let us see how you do against EHT SDRAWKCAB EGATS!” which was “THE BACKWARDS STAGE!” said backwards.

The starting siren blared, and Paul rolled his marble up to the ramp to begin his climb up the mountain that was the fourth stage. Paul started to roll up the ramp, and was about to hit the turbo button to help him make the climb, when he noticed something odd. He was actually having no trouble at all rolling up the ramp. It was like the ramp was pulling him up. He let go of the controls. Sure enough, his marble was rolling up the hill all by itself!

“Oh, I see,” said Paul to himself. “Not only am I going through the stage backwards, but the gravity itself is backwards, too!”

“That’s right, Paul,” Wizard said, confirmingly. “In fact, everything is backwards. You could say ‘everything you know is wrong,’ here.”

Paul continued to roll quite easily up the ramp. Almost too easily, in fact. Since Paul was rolling up the ramp, he couldn’t see the turns coming, and the speed the marble was picking up hill made it difficult to control. As a result, he almost rolled off the edge at several corners. Fortunately, he always regained control of the marble before falling off the edge.

“Whew, that was close,” Paul said, after pulling his marble back from the edge after a particularly close call.

He eventually came to a wide platform at the end of the long, winding path. In front of him were all of the enemies he’d met so far in

the race. The black marble, the worms, the mud puddles, and the hammers. They were all there. But these were very different from the ones he'd seen before. These were tiny! They were so small that, at first, Paul thought they were on another platform far below him, but they weren't. They tried to attack Paul's marble, but their puny side made them completely harmless.

Paul tried to roll past them to the path on the other side. Then Paul rolled over one of the black marbles, and it was crushed to pieces, with a satisfying crunch, under Paul's marble.

"That was really fun," said Paul. "These were really scary before, but now they're harmless, and I'm the scary one!"

Paul rolled to the end of the path, weaving around the platform, crushing as many of the little enemies as he could. He got such a thrill every time he rolled over another one.

"This is so much fun!" Paul said exclaimingly. "I could do this all day."

Paul had so much fun crushing all the little things that when he got to the end of the platform, he decided to turn around and go back to the beginning and roll over all the tiny foes he had missed on his first pass. When he got back to the beginning of the platform, Paul noticed all of the crushed enemies had been replaced by new ones, waiting to be crushed once again under the weight of Paul's massive moving marble. He was having so much fun crushing them that he lost all track of the time.

"Paul, what are you doing?" Wizard yelled, chastisingly. "You're running out of time! Stop crushing those harmless bad guys and go finish the race!"

"Oh no," said Paul, realizing his mistake. "I was having such a good time I totally forgot about the time!"

Paul turned around and headed straight for the end of the platform. He even hit his turbo button to get there more quickly. Paul got there and began to wind his way up the path toward the next obstacle.

"I can't believe I fell for another one of The Great Darkness's tricks," Paul said. "I've lost so much time. I'm so mad at myself."

Paul kept the turbo power on while he climbed up the twisting ramp. This meant he almost fell off the edge a few times. The extra speed and the reversed gravity made the climb more dangerous. But he was able to make the climb even faster than the last climb.

"Be careful, Paul," Wizard said. "You'll lose even more time if you fall off the edge!"

“But I have to rush,” Paul said. “I don’t have time to be careful!”

“If I gave you more time, would you slow down, please?” Wizard pleaded.

“Of course,” said Paul.

“Okay,” said Wizard. Paul saw Wizard’s wand appear, glow, and touch his marble. Just like the last time, some more time appeared on Paul’s timer.

“Thanks a lot, Wizard!” Paul said, happily.

Chapter 15

Paul got to the top of the long winding path that led to his next obstacle. He was able to be careful, take his time, and not rush, because of the time bonus Wizard gave to him. At the top of the path was a pipe that ran up to a platform out of his sight.

“How am I supposed to get up that pipe?” Paul thought, wonderingly.

Then he remembered that he was on the backwards stage.

“Oh, that’s right,” Paul exclaimed, rememberingly. “Everything I know is wrong on this stage! If the gravity is pulling me up the ramps, then of course it’s going to pull me up the transport pipes here!”

Paul rolled his marble into the mouth of the pipe, and, sure enough, Paul felt the gravity of the stage pulling him up to the top of the pipe, just as Paul thought it would. But Paul was completely surprised by what he saw when he emerged from the top of the pipe, onto the next part of the stage. When he came out of the pipe, the ground was actually above him, and the inky blackness of the abyss was below him. He was actually on the ceiling of the stage!

It took Paul some getting used to, moving his marble around on the ceiling, but he managed to figure it out without losing too much time. While he was moving down the path in the sky, he heard several loud shrieks coming at him from his right. The noises were the squawks from a whole flock of birds. A flock of birds that was coming straight at him!

Paul always hated birds. They always messed up the marbles ring by walking on it and leaving footprints, or by digging up worms to eat, which left a whole bunch of little holes. All of this messed up the roll of the marbles and got in the way of shots. As much as Paul hated worms, and was glad for the birds to come and eat them, he hated that the holes they dug with their beaks messed up his shots.

There was also the day Markie Mudd poured a whole bunch of bird seed into the marbles circle. So many birds came down to eat the bird

seed that the game was completely ruined. They tried to shoo the birds away, or brush all the seed away from the ring, but there was nothing the kids could do. The birds just kept on coming!

Now, in his marble, on the ceiling of the fourth stage of the great race to save the marble kingdom from The Great Darkness, Paul found himself in a very similar situation. The birds were flying by, so many and so fast, Paul did not know how he would be able to get to the other side of the path safely.

Like the birds on the playground that day, these birds just kept coming and coming. Eventually, Paul realized there was a pattern to the flights of the birds. It took a little time, but Paul was able to figure out the pattern, and timed his dash across the platform perfectly to get across without being hit and knocked off the path by a bird. Once across, Paul went through another transport pipe. When Paul came out, he was glad to see the ground was, once again, beneath him. All that was left was for Paul to roll down one last ramp and roll across the finish line. But something was keeping Paul from rolling down this last ramp. He tried to push his marble down the ramp, but some unknown or unseen force was holding him back. Then, suddenly, Paul realized what it was.

“Oh, right,” said Paul, realizingly. “The gravity is all backwards here. If gravity was pulling me up as I climbed the ramps earlier in the stage, then of course it would be pushing against me as I try to go down this ramp, now.”

Once Paul figured out that gravity was resisting him, he hit his turbo button and threw his marble against the ramp as hard as he could. This forced the marble down the final ramp and across the finish line.

Paul was glad to finish the stage. There were a lot of close calls in this stage, so he was relieved to have finished it with some time left on his clock.

“But this stage was really hard,” Paul thought. “The stages are getting harder and harder. I wonder what the next stage has in mind.”

With that, the crane came down to take Paul to the next stage.

Chapter 16

The crane lowered Paul onto the next stage. He didn't know it yet, but this would be the last stage of the great race to save the marble kingdom.

"How many more stages are left? I'm starting to get tired from all this racing."

"I WELCOME YOU, PLAYER," said the voice of The Great Darkness, "TO THIS, THE FINAL STAGE!"

"This is it, Paul," Wizard said to Paul. "This is the last stage of the race! All you have to do is finish this stage before time runs out and the marble kingdom will be saved!"

"Oh, wow!" exclaimed Paul. "I'm really glad to hear that. I was just wondering how many more levels there were going to be."

"Be careful, Paul," said Wizard warningly, "Everything you have seen before in this race is going to be on this stage. The Great Darkness is going to throw everything he has at you to try to stop you. You have to be strong, Paul. Make sure you keep moving toward the goal. Don't let anything distract you!"

"I got it," answered Paul. "Thanks, Wizard!"

"You are very welcome Paul," replied Wizard. "Now go win this race!"

"Will do!" said Paul, confidently.

The starting horn sounded, and Paul started down the course.

Paul first came to a long path with vacuum cleaners on one side. The path was narrow, so Paul wasn't able to roll down the opposite side of the path like he was able to in the Areal stage previously. However, this path was a straight one, so Paul just mashed his turbo button and went for it. He managed to roll down the path, past the vacuums, fast enough to avoid getting sucked in by the vacuums.

After the vacuums, Paul had to head down another long, winding path, but this one was tilted to the side, so Paul had to roll along the path as well as up the hill at the same time. This was tricky to do, but he managed to get through it.

The next part of the stage was another long, winding path, but after Paul made one of the turns, there was a mud puddle right in the middle of the path. Paul managed to get around it by rolling right down the edge of the path, avoiding the puddle. It was very hard for Paul to do, because he had to roll down the very edge of the path, with his marble exactly halfway off the edge.

Paul got past that, and then had to make a series of jumps, each farther and harder than the last. Paul used the turbo for each jump, but he came closer and closer to missing each time, but he managed to get through these as well. Then there was a path that was lined with hammers. This path was longer than the one on the Aerial stage. Paul waited to figure the pattern they were falling at, and then hit the turbo button and shot through it.

Next he came to a Black Marble rolling around on a large platform. The Marble was in front of a large ice sheet. Paul was having a hard time slipping around the Black Marble this time. It kept moving to block his path. Paul needed to slip around it, but he had to make sure he crossed the ice sheet at the right angle to get over the ice and reach the other side safely.

Eventually, Paul managed to ram the Black Marble hard enough to knock it onto the ice, where it rolled around helplessly as it slid toward and then over the edge.

“Glad I finally managed to take care of that bad Black Marble,” Paul said. “Now I need to make sure I get across this ice sheet okay.”

Paul found a safe path across the ice, lined up his shot, and rolled across safely. From this platform, Paul could see the finish line. The whole race came down to this last obstacle. Paul checked his timer, and he had lots of time, so he could go slowly and take his time, to avoid falling now that he was so close to the end.

The final obstacle was a long winding path, but it was invisible. There was a spotlight running along it, so he could briefly see where the path was, but he was going to have to go slowly, and not make a move until the spotlight came back, so he could see where the path went next. It was tricky negotiating some of the turns, and toward the end there was a hill, which was hard to climb without seeing it, but he finally managed to get over it. With that, he was at the finish line.

It was a long and difficult race. Paul came very close to failing many times. There were several close calls with the time, and he nearly fell off the edge many times, but here he was, at the end of the race. The finish line was in front of him. All that was left to do now was to cross the finish line and claim his victory over the Great Darkness in the name of the marble kingdom!

Chapter 17

“Congratulations, Player!” Said the voice of The Great Darkness. “You have defeated me. You have won another thousand years of peace for your precious marble kingdom. Go now, return to your people.”

In front of Paul appeared a doorway, which led back to the marble kingdom. Paul rolled through that doorway, and was greeted by great cheers and applause. All the marbles in the kingdom were there to greet Paul, and praise him for saving them from The Great Darkness.

There were parades and feasts to celebrate. Marbles from all around the kingdom wrote great songs and stories and epic poems to tell of the accomplishments of the Great Blue Marble who had saved them all from being swallowed up by The Great Darkness.

Of course, Paul had run the race alone, so no one really knew what he went through, but Paul was happy to answer the questions of the musicians, writers and poets. He may have elaborated a little, of course, but Paul figured it would make for better songs and stories and poems that way. So Paul told them about the vacuums, hammers and birds, but he may have said there were more of them than there really were. He told them of the Black Marble, but he may have exaggerated how closely it pursued him. He told them of the narrow, winding paths, and each time explained how he was closer to falling than the time before. In the end, the songs and stories and poems were strong and heroic, and dramatic, so Paul figured it was all worth it.

“I’m so proud of you, Paul,” said Wizard. “Your success has bought all of these marbles 1,000 years of peace and freedom. Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome, Wizard,” said Paul, welcomingly. “I’m really glad my skill with marbles was able to do so much good.”

“Indeed, Paul. Your victory today will not be forgotten by all the marbles of the marble kingdom. From now on, when you hold a marble in your hand it will be able to hear you, and you will be able to hear it.”

You will be able to perform shots even better than before, and your skill at the game of marbles will be greatly increased. Your world may not know of how you saved the marbles this day, but with the help of the marbles, you will become as famous a marbles player in your world as you are a savior in our world!"

Paul stayed a few days in the marble kingdom, enjoying the feasts, songs and parades. But after a while, Paul, having finished the task he was brought to the marble kingdom to perform, began to long for home. He wanted to see his room again, see his friends again, and, yes, even see his parents again. He wanted to stop being a marble and once again play with his own marbles.

Wizard could see Paul wanted to go back home.

"Would you like to go back home, Paul?" Wizard asked.

"I think so," Paul answered. "I mean, I do really like it here. But, I'm starting to miss my own world. I guess I would like to go back home."

"I understand," said Wizard. "In that case, I will send you back now. Close your eyes, Paul."

Paul did as he was told, and closed his eyes.

"Now," said Wizard, continuingly, "when you open your eyes, you will be back in your own world."

Paul took a deep breath, and opened his eyes...

Chapter 18

When Paul opened his eyes, he found himself back at his school, standing in the marbles circle. Kids were still walking into the school. Wizard had returned him to the exact moment he left!

Paul hurried inside, eager to tell his friends about his adventure, and all that had happened to him, but by the time he caught up to them, he realized it would be better if he didn't. They wouldn't believe him, and he decided he liked keeping it a secret to himself.

At lunch, Paul played the best game of marbles in his life. Wizard was right about Paul being able to hear and talk to the marbles. Every time he held a marble in his hand, he could hear its thoughts, and the marbles could hear Paul's thoughts. This allowed Paul and the marbles to work together to make shots. Sometimes the marble helped Paul see a shot he couldn't see himself. Other times, Paul could get the marble to follow a path a regular marble wouldn't follow.

News very quickly spread about Paul's amazing game. Paul had achieved a great deal of fame for his skill at the game of marbles before he took part in the race to save the marble world from The Great Darkness. But now Paul's fame grew even more, just as Wizard said it would. Paul not only won every game he played that week, which is usual for Paul, but he won all of the games without losing any of his own marbles. He occasionally won games without losing marbles, but never so many games in a row before. The kids at the marbles circle were talking about it so much that the next week, half the school was gathering around the marbles circle in the morning, just to see Paul play. So many new kids got into playing marbles, just so they could see him play, and say they'd played against him.

The next week, even the parents were gathering around the marbles circle to watch Paul play. They would drop off their kids and then walk over to see Paul play. Many came over to see what the crowd of kids was looking at. But they were so impressed by Paul's playing, that they stayed, and came back the next day to watch, too. Eventually, they started

bringing their friends to watch Paul play. Eventually, the kids had to start playing after school just so everyone could have a chance to see Paul play.

After a month, a few reporters from the local newspapers and TV station came by to watch the marbles games and interview Paul. One of the TV stations began broadcasting his games on TV. Paul was still in elementary school, and he was a TV star!

Just like Wizard had said, Paul was becoming as famous in his own world as he was in the marble world. No one had yet written songs or poems about him, but, in time, he was sure those things would come. For now, Paul was just enjoying playing the game of marbles, and was glad that he was getting famous for playing so well. Paul was really glad to know that he was also bringing fame to the game of marbles as well, which he was also really happy about.

Chapter 19

Paul never forgot about his time in the marble kingdom. Winning the race and saving the marble world from The Great Darkness was truly the proudest moment of his life. But he was really proud of the fame he had gotten since he returned. His games, shown on the local TV station, would be aired live after school, and then again later that evening. They got such great ratings that clips would occasionally air on national news segments, and, later, on ESPN. Because of Paul's fame, a National Marbles Association was started and they held a national championship tournament, which was broadcast on all the TV channels nationwide. Paul won the first five national tournaments, and then decided to stop participating, so that someone else could have a chance to win. While there was a drop in the popularity of the national tournament, Paul's fame kept getting bigger and bigger.

A few years after Paul dropped out of the national tournament, a worldwide marbles tournament was started. Of course Paul entered! Now Paul was playing his favorite game in front of the entire world. When he won, he was on the cover of magazines, he was on TV shows, he was on cereal boxes, he was everywhere! Truly he was now even more famous than he was in the marble world! Paul always asked his marbles if he was still widely known in the marble world, and he was always told that the marbles in the marble world still tell the stories and sing the songs about his race to save them all from The Great Darkness. But none of the marbles in the marble world were there to see him race to save their world. Here, though, the whole wide world is watching him play his favorite game, and win!

While Paul was in high school, marbles became an Olympic Sport. Paul was heading to the Olympics! He had a worldwide audience when he was playing in the world championships, but he was only playing for people who knew of the game of marbles, or had a slight interest in the game. It was like playing marbles in the school yard in front of the other kids. But now, at the Olympics, it would be like when the adults

started watching him. And just as his fame grew, then, he knew his fame would grow even more from there.

Paul won, and was now an Olympic gold-medal winning marbles player. He stood atop the medal stand, feeling really proud. He was still more proud of all the lives he saved in the marble world. As he watched the American flag rise up the flagpole, he realized he had been so obsessed with marbles that he had not once looked at the sky in all the years since his return from the marble world. And there, up in the sky, was the timer from his race in the realm of The Great Darkness. It was counting down, and it was almost down to zero!

Chapter 20

As soon as Paul saw the clock, his world shattered around him. All at once, he realized he was still in his marble, still in The Great Darkness's realm, still on the final level of the race, because he still had not crossed the finish line. All that Paul had experienced, going home, getting famous, winning Olympic gold, all of it had been one of The Great Darkness's tricks!

"I can't believe I fell for another one of The Great Darkness's tricks!" exclaimed Paul, unbelievably. With that, Paul grabbed his controls, and thrust his marble across the finish line.

"NOOOO!!!!" yelled the voice of The Great Darkness, defeatedly. "You saw through my final trick. But how?"

"Because you can't keep a good marble down!" answered Paul. He didn't want to admit seeing the clock in the sky.

"Well, congratulations, Player," admitted The Great Darkness, relinquishingly. "You have defeated me, and won another thousand years of peace for your marble world. Go now, return to your marble world!"

With that, the darkness around Paul went away, and he once again found himself in the marble kingdom. When the other marbles saw him, they started to yell and cheer and celebrate his victory! Just like in his vision in The Great Darkness's realm, marbles came from all parts of the world to see Paul, celebrate his victory, and feast with him. He was as famous in the marble world now as he was in his vision.

"Good job, Paul," said Wizard, congratulatingly. "I knew you could do it!"

"Thank you," Paul said. "But what happened in there?"

"The Great Darkness is a master of tricks," Wizard explained, explainingly. "He saw that he could not stop you by using your fears against you. Instead, as a last resort, he tried to use your hopes and dreams to distract you long enough to keep you from finishing in time."

And though it worked for a while, you saw through it in time to win the race. Again, a very good job, Paul!”

“So, does that mean none of what I saw in my vision during the race was real?” Paul asked.

“Not at all, Paul,” said Wizard. “You have the ability to do whatever you want. You can make any of the things you saw in that vision come true. And I’ll tell you this, Paul, you don’t need to talk to your marbles in order to make any of your dreams come true. If you put your mind to it, you can do whatever you want. And you have all the skill you will ever need to achieve it.”

“That’s a lot, Wizard!” Paul said again, thankfully.

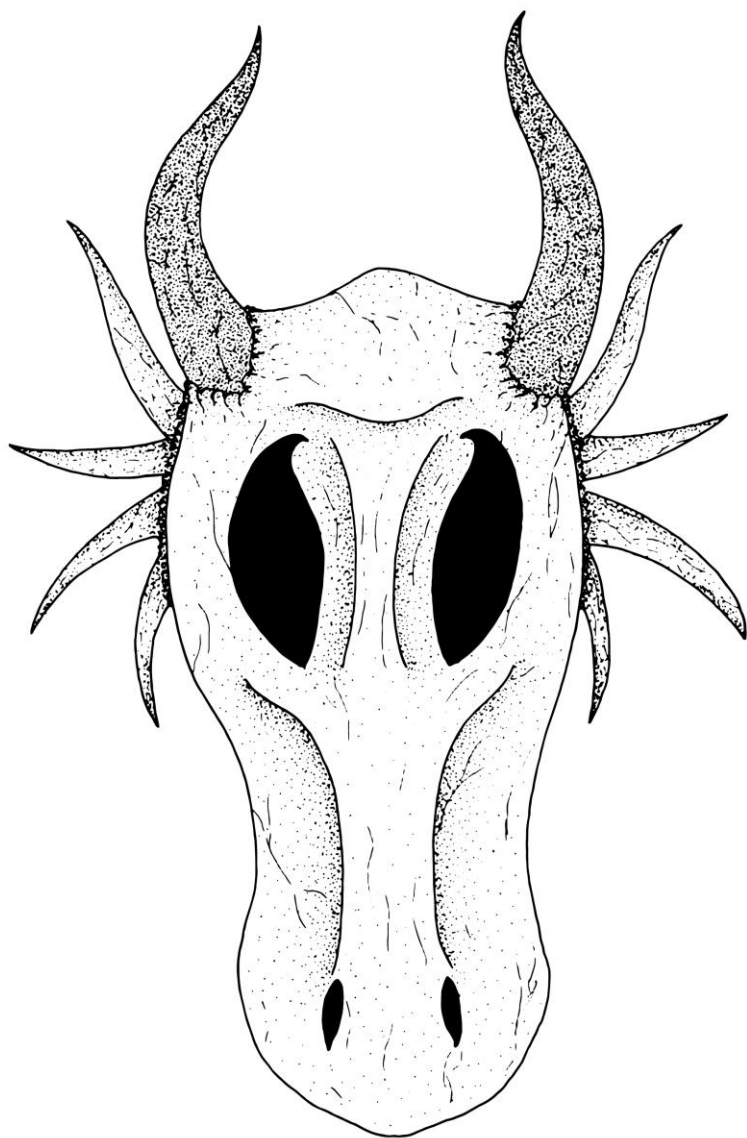
“It’s time to go back to your world now, Paul. Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “I’m ready. I’m going to go back to my world and make all of those dreams come true. Send me back now, Wizard. And thank you! Thank you for everything!”

Paul was, one last time, covered by a ring of light. When it passed, he was once again back in his own home world. Once again, he was standing in the marbles circle in front of his school. Most of the kids had gone inside. Sam had come back outside, to see what was keeping his friend so long.

“Paul, hurry up!” yelled Sam. “You’re going to be late!”

“Thanks!” Paul said. “And boy have I got a story for you!”



DOUBLE DRAGON WARRIOR

By Theodore James Geise

Chapter 1

The sky was overcast, yet the sun still peeked out from around clouds and shone down upon the boxes stacked around the factory warehouse. Lopar hoisted oil drums to and fro, as he did every day in order seem busy. It would have been a normal workday had Billy and Jimmy – the Lee Brothers – not arrived.

Billy, the red-haired juggernaut of kung fu in a blue vest cracked his knuckles; the sound was like a cue ball breaking a game of pool.

Jimmy, the blonde whirlwind of karate in a red vest, popped his neck and shoulders before busting a flex.

“You ready for this, bro?” Jimmy asked Billy.

“Let’s put the hurt to these geekwads!” shouted Billy.

The two masters of martial arts approached the guards standing in front of the warehouse gate.

“Hey, you can’t come in here, Billy and Jimmy!” one guard yelled, waving a knife in the air.

The other guard shouted, “This is Black Warrior territory!”

Jimmy did a flying jump kick that knocked the guard with the knife through the warehouse door. Billy gave the other guard an uppercut so hard that the hapless goon flew into the air and disappeared. The brothers slapped fives as they entered the warehouse.

Lopar heard the commotion at the gate and approached it with care, an oil drum still perched on his shoulder.

“Yo!” he shouted to the martial arts duo. “What y’all think you doing?”

“We’re kicking your butt, Lopar!” shouted Billy.

Lopar screamed “Oh, snap!” in surprise, and hurled the oil drum. Jimmy didn’t move out of the way in time and caught it in his bare chest.

“Ooof!” Jimmy grunted and fell down.

“You hurt my bro,” shouted Billy. “Now I’m gonna hurt you even hurtier!”

“Bring it on, little dude!” said Lopar with bravado in his voice. Lopar did his best to block the angry brother’s blows, but he ultimately fainted after succumbing to Billy’s never-ending punches and kicks.

Upon defeating Lopar, Billy brought his brother up to his feet and helped him dust off his vest and matching jeans.

“Thanks, Billy.”

“You’re welcome, Jimmy.”

The two started walking through the factory until they had to climb up a ladder, then they walked more until they had to climb down another ladder. They were then in a big open room with an active conveyor belt, as well as a door leading to where the brothers knew their kidnapped girlfriend Marian was hidden. Before they could approach the door, it opened and out came the one foe that they hoped not to have to face: Abobo.

Abobo was taller than if Jimmy sat on Billy’s shoulders, and wider than if the brothers stood side-by-side. He was a bald, bronzed colossus of muscle and anger that still found time to keep his mustache well-groomed. Wearing only a pair of blue trunks, every rippling inch of Abobo’s physique was presented to the brothers in living color, and he was bearing down on them with menace in his eyebrows.

With triple-XL hands clenched into triple-XL fists, Abobo took a swing at Jimmy. Anticipating the attack, Jimmy moved out of the way.

“Try to get around him,” said Jimmy as he continued to narrowly dodge Abobo’s blows.

“I’m gonna wail on you,” the man-giant shouted as he lumbered around the room, punching with his watermelon-sized fists and kicking with his tree-trunk legs.

“Use your spin-kick, Billy!” Jimmy commanded.

Billy let loose a barrage of kicks to work up his spin-kick, but Abobo somehow anticipated the final attack and grabbed Billy’s leg in his meaty mitt. Just as a master throws his dog a bone, so too did Abobo hurl his opponent across the room.

“Ooof!” Billy grunted as he landed on the conveyor belt.

“Oh, no!” Jimmy cried. “That conveyor belt leads to a hole that leads to who-knows-where! I gotta save him before it’s too late!”

But it was too late, because Abobo was already behind the karate master. Jimmy attempted to drive his elbow into Abobo's abs, but the goliath had already pushed Jimmy onto the conveyor belt.

As if a mountain itself roared to life with laughter, Abobo took delight in Billy and Jimmy slowly approaching the void at the end of the conveyor. Too dazed to get off of the belt in time, the brothers both toppled off the edge, and their screams echoed in the nothingness.

Chapter 2

Despite the outward appearance of sunny springtime weather, the kingdom of Alefgard was shrouded in darkness. It was prophesied that a heroic descendent would arrive and defeat the evil Dragonlord, vanquishing the curse of darkness and saving the kingdom forever. Thus far, there had been no candidates heroic enough to take on the Dragonlord and puzzle out the mystery of the darkness...

...until now.

Billy awoke to the sound and force of his own coughing. The kung fu master rolled onto his back and gazed up. Despite feeling the spring breeze and cool grass on his skin, he didn't expect to see a blue sky and fluffy clouds instead of the factory ceiling.

"What happened?" he asked to himself. Then it all came back to him with a force like Abobo's punch. "Cripes! I didn't get to save Marian! And where's Jimmy?" Billy looked around for his brother, but he was nowhere to be found.

Silently mourning the loss of his brother, Billy sat up and looked around. There were rolling hills and soft grasses everywhere that he looked.

"This definitely isn't River City. Where am I?"

Billy stood up and turned around. In the near distance, he could see a wall with houses and shops beyond it, and a tall castle beyond them.

"Maybe someone there can tell me what happened."

The air was fresher than he could ever remember breathing, almost as if there was no air pollution. He couldn't see any smog around the city, nor could he smell car exhaust. In fact, the only smell on the fresh breeze was the faint aroma of wood smoke. It reminded him of the times that he and his brother went camping, and he smiled.

Just as he began feeling secure in his environs, a little blue slime popped out of some bushes. It had wide eyes set in its squishy droplet-shaped body and a big red grin.

“Whoa,” said Billy with a startled tone. “Hey there, little buddy. What are you smiling about?”

The slime drew near. While it appeared that the creature was wiggling with joy, it was actually winding up its pounce. It hurled its squishy body at Billy and hit him in the leg with the force of a dodgeball.

“Hey, that stung a bit,” said Billy. “What gives, little dude?”

The slime hopped up and down, but didn’t respond. It hurled itself in attack once more, this time hitting Billy in the stomach and knocking the wind out of him.

“Oh, man. You’re cruising for a bruising! You’d better cut it out before something bad happens to you!” The slime ignored Billy’s threats and pounced once more. With grace and prowess, Billy spun about and timed his kick perfectly, punting the slime into the distance.

“Sorry, dude,” he said. “But you had it coming!”

Billy walked a bit further toward the castle when he heard rustling from the bushes once more. He turned to see a dozen blue blurs heading his way. The force of so many slime tackles knocked Billy to the ground. They bounced on his prone body like a contingent of double-dribbled basketballs.

Despite being battered and bruised, Billy managed to bat away enough of the slimes to get back on his feet. When Billy thought about what could make a blue slime have such a crimson grin, he suddenly lost his nerve and booked it toward the castle town. As he beat feet, he could hear the *boing* of his pursuers and occasionally felt his back sting with the force of their propelled bodies.

He closed in on the town and looked over his shoulder. The slimes gave up their chase and went back to whatever they were doing in the bushes. Billy slowed to a jog to let himself catch his breath.

“Whatever those little jerks are, they sure don’t mess around.”

Having caught his breath, Billy made his way to the castle town. Just as he approached the gate, the armored gatekeepers crossed their spears over the door and shouted, “Halt!” in unison.

Billy popped his neck and put up his dukes. “Alright! Which one of you nerds wants it first!?”

The guards assumed an offensive stance and thrust their spears into Billy's face. Having looked down the barrel of a gun and not flinched, Billy was not daunted by the attack; he quickly grabbed both spears by the shafts and pulled up. The guards lost their grips and tumbled to the dirt while Billy hefted both spears over his shoulders.

"You butt-munches gonna let me in the town, or what?"

Getting to their feet and shooting Billy dirty looks, the guards knocked thrice on the gate. With a mighty *clang*, the gate parted and opened. Billy stepped inside the castle town of Breconary.

Chapter 3

To Billy, Breconary looked like the set of a snobby English show on PBS. The men going about their day wore tunics and slouchy hats, with the women in wool dresses and bonnets. Billy felt out of place in his denim vest and jeans, but he raised his nose in the air and stuck out his pinky finger in effort to fit in with the townsfolk. This only caused him to stand out more, and he was approached by a round-set man with a mustache.

“Ho, there! Thou art a traveler?”

Billy scratched his head while he wondered how to answer a question he didn’t understand. “Sure,” he eventually said.

“Surely thou art weary. I beseech thee to visit the Traveler’s Inn over yonder.” The man pointed to a square building with a sign above the door that read, “Inn.”

Billy nodded blankly and said, “Okay.”

The stout man cocked his head at Billy’s response, then smiled and went about his business.

When Billy entered the inn, he was greeted by a friendly-faced man in his mid-forties.

“Welcome to the Traveler’s Inn! Room and board is six gold per night. Dost thou want a room?”

Billy fumbled about in his pockets and pulled out a crumpled up ten dollar bill and set it on the counter. The innkeeper stared at it and then back at Billy.

“Perchance thou misunderstood. The cost is six gold.”

Billy scratched his head and nudged the ten dollar bill closer to the innkeeper. “This is all I got,” he said.

“This be not gold,” said the innkeeper, “so I shan’t be able to accept. If thou hast no gold, thou should speaketh to King Lorik.”

The kung fu master's confusion deepened. "I should talk to the king in the castle because I'm broke? Is he like the job counselor here or something? I'm on parole, so I don't know..."

The innkeeper grew flustered with Billy's fast way of talking and interrupted him. "Speaketh to the king now, traveler."

Billy shrugged and left the inn.

Set on the main street of the town, the path from the inn led directly to the castle. On his way he saw a smith using a hammer to pound on a red-hot sword before dunking it into a vat of water. It sizzled and steamed and smelled interesting. Billy thought about how cool it would be to swing a sword around, and wished that he had one back when he was attacked by the slimes. He could have chopped them in half, or skewered them all at once. That would have been so cool!

When Billy reached the castle gates, he was again confronted by gatekeepers. They let him pass without any uncivil altercations and soon Billy was walking through the grand halls of Tantegel Castle.

Servants and guards were found in nearly every hallway that Billy passed, each of them either doing or guarding something. He walked up a grand staircase and found himself in the throne room. Sitting atop a golden throne was an older man with a white beard. The crown shining atop his white hair gave his position away: this man was king. There was a smaller throne to his left side, but it sat curiously empty.

"Hail, good sir," said King Lorik. "Thou art a traveler?"

Billy looked around to see if the king was addressing someone else in the room before saying, "Yes. I'm Billy Lee. I lost my brother while looking for my girlfriend."

King Lorik gave Billy a puzzled look before gasping in surprise. "The maiden that thou seeketh be my beloved daughter Gwaelin!"

It was then that Billy gave King Lorik a puzzled look. "No," said Billy as he shook his head, "her name's Marian. She was kidnapped by the Black Warriors and I have to get home to save her. I have to find my brother first, though."

"Nay, good sir. She be in the swamp cave under guard by a vicious dragon! Thou must save her if thee wishes to defeat the Dragonlord and return peace and goodness to Alefgard."

Billy didn't feel as though he was communicating his position effectively. "No, dude – king – I'm not trying to do any of that."

The king grew concerned. "But thou must."

“Look, Your Honor, I just want to find my brother and Marian and then go home.”

The king furrowed his brow. “But thou must.”

Billy sighed and waved his hands disapprovingly. “I just want to get my girlfriend back in time to go see *Crocodile Dundee II* in the theaters. You guys watch the first one? That part with the knife was great.”

One of the guards next to the king leaned over and whispered, “He speaks in tongues. He must be a descendent of the mighty Erdrick!”

The king nodded and asked Billy, “Art thou a descendent of the mighty Erdrick?”

Billy shrugged and said, “Maybe? I don’t know who my dad is. Why does that matter? Look, the guy said you’d give me some gold or something if I came and talked to you.”

King Lorik went slack-jawed. “Art thou a wizard?”

Billy wasn’t sure how to answer. “Uh, they say I’m a wizard at kung-fu. Does that answer your question? Look, dude – I mean, man – I mean, sir – I just wanna go home.”

The king stood from his throne and proclaimed, “Traveler! Bring home my daughter Gwaelin, find the Orb of Light to defeat the Dragonlord, and thou shalt find a way to return to your home.”

“For real?”

The King looked to his guard, who then nodded. “Yes, Sir Billy. For real.”

Billy clenched his fist, thrust his elbow downward, and triumphantly whispered, “Yes!”

“Guards! Provide the wayfarer with gold and wisdom for his travels! Billy, return to me once thou hast found my daughter.”

Billy was presented with three treasure chests: inside the first, a torch; the second, a satchel of gold; and the third, a magical key. The key was too big to fit comfortably in Billy’s pocket and the satchel was too heavy to tie to his belt-loop, so he tucked the torch under his arm and carried the goods out in his hands.

As Billy walked out of the castle, the guards doled out advice. They told him not to stray too far from the town until he was strong enough to take on the magicians guarding the bridge to the northwestern town of Garinham. They gave him tips on swordsmanship, warned him

about poisonous marshes, and told him stories of the skeletons and wolf-men to the northeast. In turn, Billy showed them some basic kung fu moves to help impress the ladies and told them about some of the horror movies he watched late at night.

When Billy left the castle, he walked directly to the blacksmith.

“Hey, bro,” said Billy to the greasy man working the forge. “I saw you busting out a pretty sweet-looking sword. How much would it cost for me to buy it?”

The blacksmith turned and gazed at him with his one good eye. “Freshly-forged, me copper sword be a hundred and eighty gold coins.”

“Dang, dude! The king didn’t give me enough money to buy a sweet sword? Bogus.” Billy dumped the contents of his satchel out into the huge hands of the blacksmith. “What can I get for this?”

The blacksmith quickly counted out the coins and then went into his back room. He returned with a smoothed oaken club and padded mail made from oiled leather.

“How am I gonna carry that baseball bat and this torch plus all this other crap? You got a bag or something?”

The blacksmith growled and retrieved a shoulder bag from beneath a pile of forging equipment. “Take this and be on your way, ye uncouth lout.”

“Whatever. Thanks, dude.”

Billy put his armor on under his denim vest and put his other goods in the pack. Slapping his bat against his open palm, Billy was ready to rumble...and he knew exactly where to find a gang of slimy punks ready for a bruise cruise.

Chapter 4

Billy strode out onto the Plains of Tantegel with his club resting against his shoulder. He retraced his steps back to where he was bushwhacked by the blue slime and then called out, “Hey, butt-horns! I’m back!”

Answering the call to battle was the same group of blue slimes, their smiles just as wide and just as red. Billy was ready for them when they launched themselves his way.

If the battle were a baseball game, Billy would have hit a grand slam. Any slime that Billy didn’t knock out of the air collided harmlessly with his leather padding and bounced to the ground. He then kicked them into the distance.

When the fight was through, Billy checked the bushes to see what they had been doing. He found another satchel of gold coins and some animal bones, but nothing terribly interesting. The slimes must have just been goofing around, or eating lunch or gossiping.

Billy walked around the plains looking for trouble and found it relatively quickly. More blue slimes, along with a few red ones, attacked him. The red ones hit hard enough for him to feel their sting through his padding, but they were just as easy to hit a home run with as their blue counterparts.

Billy spent his entire afternoon beating slimes with his club and gathering up what few coins they hoarded in their nests. The sun began to set, casting a soft orange glow over the hills before the gloom of twilight crept from the shadowy woods that Billy had wandered into. Billy grew hungry, and the thought of room and board at the Traveler’s Inn was enticing. Even so, he was enjoying the change of pace that came from beating up monsters instead of street thugs.

Just when he thought that the aggressive wildlife were a piece of cake to beat off, Billy encountered a fluttering drakee. Like an unholy crossbreed of a vampire bat and a Halloween devil, the blue creature

flapped around Billy and dove at him with needle-like fangs ready to suck his blood. During his first encounter, he was bitten enough times to feel woozy before he was able to thwack the monster out of the air with his club. Subsequent fights went better, but he was worn out and sore in a matter of minutes. He desperately needed to rest his weary bones.

As Billy made his way back to town, he heard an eerie wail coming from the hills. He looked around, but saw no slimes or drakees. Was it the wind? Billy shrugged and kept walking.

Then he heard the wailing again, but this time it was coming from the nearby forest. Still no sign of danger, but Billy quickened his pace back to Breconary.

Then he heard the wailing again, but this time it was coming from right behind him. Slowly, Billy turned to look over his shoulder. Whew...nothing there! Then Billy turned back around and...

"Boo!"

Floating in front of him was a ghost! It wore a tall-topped hat, like a witch's, and had a long tongue lolling out of its oversized mouth. Its little arms were plugged into its ears and it waved his fingers as if to say, "Neener-neener-nee-ner!"

Billy had never seen a ghost in real life, so he wasn't sure what to say to it.

"Uh...what...why are you still haunting this place, O spirit?"

The ghost gave Billy a raspberry, spitting all over him in the process.

"Aww, dude! That's nasty. What's your problem?"

The ghost gave a whispery giggle and then vanished.

"Cripes," said Billy as he wiped ghost-goober from his body. "I hope that inn has a shower."

Chapter 5

“Master Lee, thine bath hath been drawn.” The innkeeper’s daughter curtsied before leaving the kung fu champion alone in his room.

Billy shed his clothes and dipped his big toe in the bathwater; the temperature was just right! He sank down into the cast-iron tub and sighed heavily. The warm water intensified the warrior’s sleepiness – a sleepiness brought on by an afternoon of fights across space and time. Further compounding the drowsiness was his dinner, comprised of what the innkeeper assured Billy was pheasant (and not rat, as Billy initially believed), as well as mashed potatoes and peas. So accustomed was Billy to a diet of ramen noodles and fast-food tacos that the food sat both heavily and heavenly in his stomach.

Billy slid down so that he was submerged in hot water up to his nose. He closed his eyes in the steam and, for a brief moment, let his stress slip away. Marian, Jimmy, Gwaelin, and the Dragonlord all seemed a distant memory. He was one with the warm water, the steam, and the cast-iron tub.

Then he opened his eyes.

Splashing out of his euphoria-inducing bathtub, Billy struggled to cover his shame in the presence of the old man in a gray-hooded robe. He was staring at Billy from the stool in front of his room’s window. The old man’s long white beard barely covered his crooked smile.

“Holy smokes!” Billy shouted in alarm. “Who are you? How in the heck did you get in here? You’d better not try nothing, old man! Naked or not – I will mess you up!”

The old man gave a long, dry laugh. “The petulance of youth! So brash! So strong and so brash!”

“Jeez, guy. Take a chill pill and throw me a towel or something!” Billy was dripping bathwater all over the stone floor.

The old man threw Billy a cloth, which the warrior quickly tied around his waist.

“Okay, old dude, what gives? What’s your damage, huh?”

The old man tapped some dried leaves into a long pipe and then lit them with a snap of his fingers. No matches, no lighter – just the man’s own internal spark. Billy’s eyes bugged out at the sight. Did he see what he really just saw?

“Be this the first bit of magic thou hast seen, aye?”

Billy snapped out of his bedazzlement. “Nah. I’ve seen a magician saw a lady in half one time. It was totally gnarly.”

“Thou speak strangely. Where dost thou hail?”

Billy cocked his eyebrow and said, “Uh...the city?”

“Well, good sir, I am here because thou hast the talent to be a caster of spells.”

“You mean like a wizard? Straight up?”

The old man nodded sagaciously, and then said, “Thou hast a great discipline, so I can see. Mentally sound and physically fit, thou art a vessel for the arcane.”

“So I can shoot fireballs and fly and stuff?”

The old man laughed again, a sound like autumn leaves tumbling across a road. “Should thee develop thine skills, then yes. Dost thou wish to learn?”

“Can I get dressed first?”

“Thou must.”

“Then totally!”

Chapter 6

Stars emblazoned the sky and surrounded the heavy-hanging moon. In the clearing behind the inn, the old man handed Billy his staff and then hobbled to a nearby tree stump. Upon the stump he rested an empty bottle. “Thou shalt learn to strengthen thy mind for sorcery as thou hath learneth to strengthen thy body for battle.”

Billy looked at the staff thoughtfully. It was a knotty bough with a grip smoothed into it from decades of use. He looked at the strange old man and said, “I’ve been beating up chumps since I could make a fist and swing it.” He tossed the staff back and forth. “If I could master kung fu from the streets, I can learn some hocus-pocus from you, mister.”

The old man gave a crackling cackle. “Thou hath bravado. I shall show thee two spells for thine most basic use. Focus upon breaking the bottle lying on yonder stump.”

Billy gripped the staff tight and shut his eyes even tighter. He envisioned the bottle suddenly shattering, flying into the air, or being crushed by a ghostly hammer. He looped the visions over and over, focusing on intensifying their clarity. Eventually, when he did not hear the bottle break, he opened his eyes and looked at the old man.

“Nothing happened,” Billy said. “No matter how hard I thought, nothing happened.”

The old man laughed again, so hard this time that he began coughing to the point where he had to spit something onto the grass.

“The joke is on thee! It is an impossibility for thee to breaketh a bottle with thy mind!”

Billy made a *tch* sound with his tongue against his cheek. “That’s bogus. Why’re you playing with me, you old coot?”

The old man approached Billy and gently took his staff back. “I wanted to see if thou would fall for it. Now, raise up thy hands and chant this magic spell.”

“Whatever, man. You’re just messing with me now.”

The old man snickered. "I hath fun no more tonight at thy expense. 'Tis time to begin thy lesson true. Thou must repeat after me."

The old man said a jumble of made-up-sounding words in a language that Billy was pretty sure wasn't real. In the wizard's hands formed a ball of fire, which he hurled at the bottle. The sound of glass shattering echoed in the night air.

Billy was blown away by the display. "I've seen some cool stuff before, but nothing as righteous as that! Wow, old guy, I shouldn't have doubted you."

The old man smiled and gestured to Billy to signal that it was his turn. Billy looked and saw that another bottle had taken the shattered one's place – but the old man never moved!

Billy did his best to wrap his tongue around the odd combination of syllables and missing vowels, but no fireball appeared. He tried again, but again his pronunciation of the mystical chant wasn't quite right. Living up to the adage that the third time is the charm, Billy focused on each word before pronouncing it. It felt as though his every word were a lit stick of dynamite that exploded on its way out of his mouth. It was working!

Billy raised his hands to the sky and felt the warmth of the elements in his hands. As if pitching a baseball, Billy wound up and threw the flames at the bottle. The satisfying sound of its shattering gave Billy goosebumps.

"I did it!" he cried triumphantly. "I'm a wizard!" In his joy, Billy hadn't heard the old man chant another spell. When Billy turned to high-five the wizard, he was instead struck in the chest by the fireball thrown by the old man. The force of the impact knocked him across the clearing while the heat of the fire scorched his bare skin and singed his vest.

The moisture from the cool grass was like a balm to his wound. With a sputtering moan, he rolled onto his back and saw stars. It took a moment before he realized that the stars were really there in the sky.

"What gives?" groaned Billy. "That really hurt!"

The old man cackled. "To heal thyself, chant thy spell backward."

Billy slapped his palm against his forehead and frowned. "This is just another test, ain't it?" When Billy looked up, the only trace of the old man was the echo of his dry laugh.

Focusing on each word in reverse, Billy chanted the spell in reverse. That it only took two tries to get right made Billy feel as good as his freshly-healed chest. The spell even mended his denim vest.

The elation of becoming a wizard soon became overshadowed by the fatigue of the day, so Billy went back into his room at the inn and fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Chapter 7

The song of birds chirping woke Billy. The morning sun shone through the window in his room and he could see dust motes dancing in the light. Living on the street made Billy accustomed to waking up in strange and unfamiliar surroundings, so to experience such an idyllic awakening brought a tinge of warmth to his hardened heart.

The innkeeper's daughter must have snuck in earlier, for waiting at the small table in Billy's room was a still-warm plate of breakfast. He heartily ate the eggs and sausage and quickly drained his glass of cool milk. It was the best breakfast he could remember eating.

Gathering up his gear, Billy left his room and waved goodbye to the innkeeper and his daughter. He gave enthusiastic thumbs-ups to the townspeople and made his way to the smithy. The gruff blacksmith was still eating his breakfast when Billy approached.

"Aye, what ye want?"

Billy dumped out a pile of gold onto the smith's breakfast table. "I want that sweet sword of yours, and I got the dough this time. You can have this back, too." Billy set his club down on top of the coins.

The blacksmith finished his morning tea in one gulp and then got up to retrieve the sword.

"Ye be careful now, laddie," the blacksmith said as he tapped his eye patch. "Don't go pokin' yer eye out like I did in me youth."

"I've been in plenty of knife fights, so I know how to handle a blade. Thanks, bro." Billy attached the sword's sheath to his belt loop, snapped his fingers, and then adopted an exaggeratedly enthusiastic stance while pointing appreciatively at the burly smith. The man scoffed and mumbled something negative about bairns.

Billy passed through the gate, nodded a greeting to the guards, and then walked out onto the plains. Accustomed to beating up gangs single-handedly, the kung fu wizard was prepared for the trouble waiting him at the bridge to Garinham.

As he walked through the fields, Billy saw a lone slime. It fled; its beaten-up brethren must have warned it about not messing with the man in blue. In fact, no monster bothered him in the forests or the hills. It was as if he was repelling the ne'er-do-wells with his own outward ferocity. He was rather bummed out by the lack of rough-and-tumble.

The boring walk became less so when he heard the babbling of a brook. He followed the flow of water and soon came to the bridge to Garinham. Sitting around its cobblestones was the group of magicians. Their robes were gray like the old man's but their hoods were drawn up to conceal their faces. It made Billy angry that the magicians were using their eldritch powers to shake down travelers instead of to save ladies in half or to make doves appear out of thin air. He approached them with his sword in hand.

"Hey, you sissies!" Billy shouted. "You guys better clear out of here or I'm gonna bust your heads open!"

The magicians looked at one another and then back at Billy before erupting into laughter. Billy seized the opportunity and chanted his magic word. Reaching back into his memories of last night, he plucked out the stillness and calm required to channel a fireball from his hand and out through the tip of his sword. It took the group by surprise, knocking one of the magicians off the bridge and into the water below. The remaining spellcasters patted out their robes and chanted magic words of their own. At once, the group hurled incendiary magic missiles that honed in on Billy. He cut a few of the fireballs down with his sword, but caught the rest in his leg and shoulder. The smell of his own flesh sizzling made him want to vomit.

"That all you got, you scrawny weaklings? Check this out!" Billy chanted the spell of hurting in reverse to make it the spell of healing. Not only was his flesh burned no more, but his nausea evaporated!

Billy took advantage of the magicians' surprise and bum-rushed them. Knocking the wind out of one mage with his elbow, he quickly turned and thrust his foot into the hood of another. He swung his sword at the third, but missed. Riding the momentum of the blow to its end, Billy did a spin-kick that knocked another magician off of the bridge.

There were two magicians left, and each was chanting a spell. Billy chanted his own as he leapt into the air. At the end of the spell, he turned his jump into a jump kick and launched himself at the magicians.

The rage amplified his magical force and engulfed his entire body in enchanted fire. Flames exploded from his leg as his kick connected, with the fury sending the remaining magicians flying into the distance.

His opponents vanquished, Billy, panting from the exertion, thrust his fists into the air and whooped triumphantly. “I have mastered the Fire-Breathing Dragon Kick! Jimmy’s gonna flip his wig when he finds out.”

It was then, suddenly, that Billy felt a twinge of sadness that spidered through his core. The loss of his brother had become a mere footnote in his bizarre adventure, but he now felt immeasurable sadness that he couldn’t share this victory with his twin brother.

Frowning in determination, Billy clenched a fist in front of his face and whispered, “I’ll find you, bro.”

Chapter 8

During midday, the village of Garinham was normally bustling with patrons looking to purchase tools or herbs. Since trade had been nearly halted by the mischievous magicians, the town was silent. When Billy Lee strode into town, the villagers were in shock.

“This youth hath made it beyond the magicians!” the townsfolk shouted. Singing the young beefcake’s praises, the villagers rushed him to the inn and fought about which of them could buy him lunch.

“Thou hast done Garinham a great service, lad,” said the innkeeper between gulps of ale. “Merchants will surely arrive to trade once more. Were old Garin still alive, his silver harp he surely would have gifted to thee.”

“That’s nice and everything,” said Billy, “but I can’t play no harp. Besides, I beat those guys up out of the kindness of my own heart.” He poked his lunch with his fork. “This pot pie is enough for me.”

Merchants that had long been twiddling their thumbs began setting up shop again. Billy gazed upon their wares with little interest before he happened upon a man selling instruments of violence.

“Yo, dude!” Billy shouted in amazement. “What’s up with that killer axe you got hanging on the wall?”

Taken aback by Billy’s mannerisms, it took the man a moment to discern the question. “Yonder hand-axe be one-and-one-half as strong as thy sword. For a mere five-hundred and fifty coins, it be yours to take home today.”

It was Billy’s turn to be taken aback. “Man, for real? I just restored your village to economic harmony, and you’re gonna turn around and try to rip me off? Don’t I get a hero’s discount or something?”

The merchant shook his head. “Nay,” he said.

“How am I going to make that sort of cash? By punching out a bunch of robe-wearing eggheads? I don’t think so, chief.”

“Speaketh to the wise man at Garin’s grave on the other side of town for advice with thy quandary.”

“Fine, dude. But I’ll remember this the next time some pencil-neck tries to deep-fry your nards.”

Billy left Garinham’s market district and walked the path to Garin’s grave. There was no headstone to mourn the loss of the powerful wizard Garin, but rather only an entrance to his tomb. Standing in front of the vault was the old wizard from the prior evening.

“Hail to thee, Billy Lee,” said the old man.

Billy laughed. “I don’t believe it. You’re the wise guy that the price-gouger told me to come find? What’s the beef?”

“Thou hast proven thy arcane skills by dispatching the magicians. Now, thou must prove thyself a descendent of Erdrick by seeking out the tablet in the marsh cave to the south.”

“What? Why?”

“Reading the tablet wilt prove that thou art a descendent of Erdrick.”

“I don’t know who Edrick...”

“Erdrick,” the old man corrected.

Billy sighed in exasperation. “I don’t know who *Erdrick* is, but reading a tablet isn’t going to make me his kid or nothing. If I find Princess...uh...Guinevere? Gwendolyn...”

“Gwaelin.”

“Yeah, her. If I find her and then beat up the Dragonlord, the king said that he’ll send me home.”

As he was wont to do, the old man laughed. “The king’s mind shan’t be where it once was, for he has sent on this quest every lad in the kingdom dimwitted enough to listen to him.”

“Thanks for calling out my lack of formal education. I learned on the streets, man! Look, are you gonna help me out with this?”

“Thy strength, courage, and spirit speaketh volumes of thy character. If thou art worthy to face the challenges set before you by the king, thou must prove thyself strong enough to restore balance to the kingdom of Alefgard.

“Within the tomb of Garin rests his beloved silver harp. Delve into the catacomb, find the harp, and bring it back to me. Magical creatures have made this crypt home, so I shall teach thee a new spell.”

“Rad to the max!” shouted Billy with glee.

The old man chanted something mystical-sounding and then asked Billy to cast a spell at him. When Billy tried to speak the magic words, they fizzled out like wet firecrackers.

“What’d you do to my magic?”

“The spell I hath cast be one to stop the spells of others. Use it in the crypt to protect thyself from what lurks within. Now go forth, young Billy!”

And Billy went forth.

Chapter 9

The depths of Garin's tomb made it too dark for Billy to see even the cobwebs in front of his face. As he struggled his way through the hall, he remembered the torch in his pack. After retrieving it from his pack, he fumbled to get it lit.

"Wait," he said aloud, his voice echoing down the hallway. "I'll get it burning with my fire magic. Bodacious!" And so, Billy began to chant his spell of hurting. While he tried to pronounce each syllable correctly, his tongue reversed direction and he spat out nonsense. When he tried a second time, his tongue was so wily in his mouth that he mistakenly bit it.

"This is a load of horse crap. How long is this shut-up-spell going to last?" Billy felt his anger peter out into annoyance once he puzzled the situation out: this was another of the old wizard's tests.

"I can show this old dude that I'm bad enough to find that harp and bring it back so that he can play sissy music on it."

With a mighty overhead strike against the wall, Billy caused enough friction to light the torch. In the warm glow of the torchlight, he could see only a short way before him in the dusty hallway. The air was stale and smelled like a pawnshop mattress, both of which made it difficult for him to keep his concentration on the task at hand. Between the darkness, the stuffiness, and the stankiness, Billy felt as though he was being slowly asphyxiated by an old tire.

Just when Billy felt as though he would teeter over the edge of claustrophobia, the sight of something scuttling in his periphery broke him out of his psychosis. He drew his sword and held his torch out in front of him. The air of the catacomb felt cool on his face without his torch being held at eye-level.

"Come out, chicken! I'm not afraid of no creepy-crawlies or magic choads or whatever sort of thing you might be. Face me *mano a mano*!"

When the creature showed its face, namely its single protruding eye, Billy gulped hard. The monster's mottled body was vaguely cephalopodan in shape with a mass of wriggling orange tentacles beneath it and two curved antennae cresting its head-body. When its huge eye blinked, Billy could hear the flapping slap of its eyelids connecting. It was the subterranean bone-picker – the monster called the druin.

“Sick!” Billy shouted. “Whatever you are, I’m gonna deliver to you the most severe of beatings unless you beat all those feet in another direction.”

The druin drew near. Billy lunged forward with his copper sword, but the monster skirted the attack and walloped Billy with its tentacles. The blows felt like he was being roughly clubbed by foam noodles. Billy quickly recovered and swung wide his sword just as the horrible creature lashed out again. With a loud *plop*, off went one of its tentacles.

A huge tear welled up in the creature's eye and then splattered to the ground. Its pain became anger, and the monster leapt at Billy. The kung fu wizard anticipated the pounce and unleashed a flying uppercut that rocketed the creature into the ceiling. Its eye rolled around in a daze before it shook off the confusion and attacked again. It encircled Billy's arms and legs with its tendrils, pinning the warrior down and forcing him to drop his sword and his torch. With its remaining tentacles, the druin unleashed a barrage of punches to Billy's face. Left hook, right hook, left hook, right hook – the monster was pummeling Billy senseless. Senselessness, however, was where Billy thrived.

Having been beaten to a pulp more than once in his life, Billy learned to reach an almost euphoric state while being punch drunk. The Zen-like mindset allowed him to react quickly by headbutting the monster's tentacle just as it rained down another blow. The sudden force of Billy's skull hitting its appendage took the druin off-guard. It shook its stubbed tentacle and momentarily took its gaze off of Billy.

The kung fu master seized the opportunity to break free his right arm and, in one fluid motion, punched the creature right in its eye. The druin launched itself from off of Billy and clutched its eye with all of its tentacles. The creature's tears slipped through its many limbs and loudly struck the ground.

Freed from the druin's grasp, Billy reached for his sword and chopped at the monster. To Billy's chagrin, the sword glided through the open air and clanged against the ground; the creature had already made a hasty escape to no doubt nurse its blackened eye.

“What a twerp,” Billy said as he dusted himself off, picked up his torch, and continued down the hall.

Though Billy heard the slinking of tentacles all around him as he walked through the dark cave, no druin or other beastie dared to show its face (or single protruding eye). After a few moments of quiet (albeit boring) walking, Billy happened upon a locked door.

After fumbling at the lock in a clumsy attempt at picking it, Billy remembered the magic key given to him by the king. After fishing the key out of his pack, he remembered one crucial detail: his magic had been temporarily disabled. Did this work for the lock? He needed to try his magic to find out.

The bruises inflicted by the druin weren’t anything to write home about, but Billy chanted the spell of healing to see if it worked. He could feel the swelling around his eyes go down, and it no longer hurt his face when he rubbed his hand across his manly stubble. Success!

Even though the magic key was significantly larger than any other key he had ever seen before, it slid seamlessly into the lock. When he turned it and popped the tumblers, Billy was shocked to see that the key suddenly vanished.

“What the crap?” Billy exclaimed. “What kind of magic key is one-use only? It’s magic! Man, what a gyp.”

When Billy pushed open the door, something hot and spongy launched itself at him from the darkness. His scream echoed through the lonely halls.

Chapter 10

Billy wrestled with what felt like a beach-ball-sized loogie. His sucker punches didn't faze the thing's snotty body while its teeth, like tarnished butter-knives, pricked his skin. Billy tried to gain the upper hand long enough to roll the tussle into the fallen torch, but the goopy creature was too slippery to wrangle. It was then that Billy had an idea.

Like gripping soap too tightly in the shower, Billy squeezed the creature until it popped into the air. In a single adroit motion, Billy did a handspring back to his feet and bashed the airborne monster with his elbow. As it hurdled though the open door into the adjoining chamber, Billy dashed to pick up his fallen gear and rushed into the room.

The room had a forked path: one led to the right and the other led to the left. Its ashen walls gave no indication as to which way was correct, though Billy's torch picked up the glistening trail of whatever it was that attacked him. Still itching for a fight, Billy hurriedly followed the slime-slickened path down the left fork.

He followed the curving corridor until he reached a dead end. The end wasn't quite so dead, however, for against the wall was the sort of treasure chest that Billy had only seen in movies.

Billy lifted the lid and found a cache of coins and a bundle of fragrant herbs. "Bitchin'!" he exclaimed. As he crammed the booty into his satchel, something sticky dripped into his hair.

"Aww, barf, dude!" he shouted. Instead of looking up to stare face-to-face with his quarry, Billy did a backflip so high that his feet scraped the drippy thing from the ceiling and onto the floor. Billy landed to face the beast and gaze upon it in the torchlight.

The lumpy creature's eyestalks popped out from the top of its slug-like body and focused on Billy. It was a droll: a subterranean scavenger from the darkest depths. It curled its stubby, flap-like arms into fists and raised its torso. Upon closer inspection, the creature wasn't

raising its torso so much as it was opening its mouth. The monster's entire lower half was mouth alone!

Before the droll could draw near, Billy said, "Eww!" and punted the gastropod down the hall. "I'm done with that thing," he said and retraced his steps back to the central chamber.

Billy followed the path down the other fork. The drolls and druids kept their distance, which was fine with Billy. He had his fill of messing with abyssal abominations for the day.

After descending down a staircase and into another even stuffier and stankier hallway, Billy began to wonder why this Garin guy had himself interred in a monster-filled labyrinth. It seemed a good deterrent from grave robbers lusting after his harp, but what if the guy's family wanted to leave flowers on his grave? Billy guessed that they just left the flowers at the entryway and then hightailed it. Maybe the dead guy had been gone for so long that there wasn't any family left. With his brother missing, Billy understood how sad it was to not have any family left. He tried not to dwell on the sadness, but the sepulcher's unchanging scenery lent little else for him to think about.

As if on cue, his thoughts were interrupted by an unearthly moan.

"Hell naw," Billy said, pinching his face into a scowl. "I'm not in the mood for no more ghosts licking my mug." There was another moan, but this time it sounded closer.

Billy gripped his sword tight as he crept through the halls, waving his torch back and forth to check for supernatural signs. When he wasn't looking, a rock hit him in the back of the head.

"Harsh!" he shouted. "What gives?" Another rock came at him from the opposite direction and hit him in the kidney. "Not cool! I've had to pee for like ten minutes!" Billy was taunted by a ghostly laugh.

The kung fu master could feel a force tugging at his sword. Whatever the spirit was, it was trying to yank his weapon away. "Cut it out! What, are you like a poltergeist or something?" Billy kept pulling against the unseen presence until the poltergeist suddenly let go. Now pulling against nothing, Billy fell onto his backside. Even through his jeans, he could feel the coldness of the crypt's dusty floor.

"That's it!" Billy shouted as he got to his feet. "I'm gonna go Craig T. Nelson on your ectoplasmic behind!" Billy channeled his anger into magic power and chanted. The spell of hurting engulfed his body in flames and lit up the entire hallway. Hovering in the distance, Billy could see a purple haze shaped vaguely like a legless person. Like a spark racing up a line of gunpowder, Billy hurdled down the hall and collided with the

spirit. The conflagration lasted a moment before the poltergeist wailed and dissipated into the ether.

Billy sheathed his sword and cried out, “These halls are clean!”

Chapter 11

Billy strode through hallways and descended stairs until he felt sure that he was one floor away from encountering the gates of Hades. The monsters keeping their distance broke their unofficial truce and attacked Billy *en masse*. Prepared for the attack, Billy was a whirlwind of kicks, sword blows, and flying uppercuts that avoided tentacles, teeth, and gloop. Gashed and mashed, the fiends scurried into the darkness and left Billy alone.

Tired and still having to pee, Billy finally happened upon an iron-reinforced door. Runic symbols were etched along the door, but no keyhole was present. Anticipation made his heart flutter as he opened the door.

On either side of the great stone coffin of Garin were twin braziers filled with crackling fire. Billy smiled at the sight of the silver harp glittering in the flickering light. As he approached the harp, the door behind him slammed and locked. He spun around just in time to see a keyhole appear in the door. Having spent his magic key, Billy was now trapped!

A deep, booming laugh resounded in the chamber. From a corner of darkness, a figure in a purple hooded cloak emerged.

The figure raised a gem-tipped staff and proclaimed, "I am the evil warlock!"

Billy scoffed. "I am the good kicker-of-warlock-butt!"

The warlock laughed. "Thou hast bested my pupils on the bridge – no easy feat! Dost thou have the might to defeat me? The Dragonlord himself hath granted me fabulous..." But before the warlock could finish his villainous soliloquy, Billy chanted the stop-spell. The warlock gasped as the memories of his magic spells bled together, jumbling the words into nonsense. He couldn't even remember the simple cantrip for warming his morning cocoa!

“Ohhh, yeah!” Billy shouted as he launched himself feet-first at the warlock and knocked the evildoer to the floor.

Gasping for air, the warlock stumbled to his knees and leaned against his staff. “Powerful foe though thou art, Sir Billy, canst thou defeat my minions three?”

Before Billy could figure out how the warlock knew his name, the warlock’s cronies revealed themselves from the shadows. Billy stared down the magidrakee, the druinlord, and the drollmagi: larger and more vicious versions of the creatures he faced before.

Before Billy could react, the druinlord’s eye spun in a hypnotic pattern while its tentacles bobbed up and down. Despite his mind racing in peril, Billy could feel his eyelids grow heavy. Even in his daze, he could see the drollmagi’s arm-nubs flapping as it cast the spell to halt Billy’s magic. The magidrakee fluttered in a circle and then cracked its spaded tail; a blast of fire launched from its flapping wings and knocked Billy into the wall.

As Billy felt his consciousness wane, he saw what could only be a hallucination brought on by the blunt force trauma.

“Jimmy?”

Billy’s brother knelt down and smiled. “Are you going to let these feebs get the better of you?”

“I’m so tired, Jimmy – and I have to pee like a racehorse. It’s a bad combo.”

Jimmy slapped Billy hard, though in reality it was the druinlord striking with its tentacle. “Snap out of it, bro. You have to get us home to save Marian. This is the real deal!”

When the magidrakee bit Billy’s neck, he saw it as Jimmy digging thumbnails into his flesh. “Get up and mop the floor with these turkeys!”

The drollmagi smothering Billy with its smelly body was just Jimmy sitting on Billy’s head. “Come on, bro! Put an end to this!”

Just when Jimmy was about to grind his boot into Billy’s face, the kung fu warrior lashed out and caught Jimmy in his tender nethers. When his brother gave a high-pitched moan and crumpled over, Billy saw that it was actually the warlock whose weekend he just ruined.

Billy arched his back and spun his legs around in a tornado kick. Riding the momentum, Billy hurled himself to his feet and went to town on his foes. Knees met eyeballs, chops battered wings, and hard punches

met soft bodies. In the blink of a druin's eye, Garin's final resting place was littered with dazed and moaning bad guys.

"You can't molest the best!" Billy said as he triumphantly flexed his bicep.

When Billy lifted the silver harp from the coffin, he heard a rumble from the other side of the room. The stone wall shifted and revealed a staircase up. Billy sheathed his sword, tucked the harp under his arm, and swapped his torch for the warlock's staff as he made his speedy escape.

"Curse you, Billy Lee!" whimpered the warlock. "Curse you!"

"Eat my shorts!" Billy retorted as the stone wall closed up behind him.

Chapter 12

When Billy emerged from the crypt, the light of day was a fading canvas soon to be painted over in the tangerine-and-violet sky. Billy breathed in as much of the fresh Garinham air as his lungs would allow and then relieved himself far enough away from the tomb so as not to desecrate the grave.

“Thou hast the harp?” a scratchy voice asked.

Billy finished his business, zipped his fly, and then turned to glare at the old man. “Yes, I have your dweeby harp.” Billy retrieved the instrument from under his arm and presented it to the aged wizard. The old man’s eyes lit up with child-like glee as he quickly grabbed it.

“A tremendous deed thou hast done,” the old man said with a wide grin. “True to my word, I shall grant thee thy reward.”

“Phew, well I can’t say that I didn’t earn it. I feel like I’ve experienced every Misfits song come to life. Monsters and ghosts and stuff – jeez. So, you gonna help me find my brother?”

The old man intoned something and waved his hands. The warlock’s staff, now in Billy’s hands, changed. Its black shaft became silver like the harp, and its sinister-looking gem became a storm cloud pierced with lightning bolts.

“Thou holdeth in thy hand the Staff of Rain. To find thy brother and return to thy realm, thou must find the Stones of Sunlight. Use them with thy staff to create the Rainbow Drop. The Rainbow Drop shalt giveth thee the ability to create a bridge so that thou canst cross the hazardous sea and enter the Dragonlord’s lair: Castle Charlock.”

Billy squinted and asked, “You making all this up?”

The old man laughed. “Nay, Sir Billy. Castle Charlock lies across the sea. Thou canst see its evil walls from the parapets of Tantegel. Thou may only cross to Charlock via the Rainbow Bridge.”

“You kidding? The bad guy’s base is across the street from the king’s pad? Unbelievable! Why don’t they just send some, like, fleets or something across the water to bring that fool to beatdown-town? Heck, they can just shoot me from a catapult and I’ll go dropkick-first through the jerk’s bedroom window.”

“King Lorik hath lost a contingent of men attempting to cross by land and by sea. You see, the sea hath been made putrid by the Dragonlord’s magic. ‘Tis filled with unspeakably horrible beasts that cease any attempts at ship-sailing. Bridge-building crews hath been scorched to cinders by dragons. And catapulting is right out; thou art silly.”

“What about magic? Can’t we use magic?”

The old man shook his head. “The area is seeping with antimagic. ‘Tis only the Rainbow Bridge that hath the power to grant thee passage.”

Billy laid his palm against his head and let his shoulders slouch. “Wait, didn’t the king say that I needed to find the Stone of Light to vanquish the darkness or something? So if I get that, I’m done, right?”

“Nay, thou speaketh of two different things. The Stones of Sunlight shalt aid thee in making the Rainbow Bridge. The Orb of Light shall vanquish the Dragonlord and the curse of darkness brought upon by his evil magic. He keeps it hidden with him at all times.”

“This is confusing,” said Billy. “How do you know all of this crap? Why aren’t you just doing this all yourself since you’re like a super wizard and stuff?”

The super wizard laughed. “I am too great of age to attempt such a task. Dost thou know that the great seer Mahetta hath predicted that a descendent of Erdrick shalt defeat the Dragonlord? Thou hast proven thyself equivalent to such a descendent, and thou hath descended literally from the sky. ‘Tis fair enough a compromise, assuredly.”

“Who is Mahetta? Are you Mahetta?”

“Nay.”

Billy began tugging at his hair. “This is blowing my mind! I just want to go back home!”

“In saving the princess, thou shalt be working toward defeating the Dragonlord, which in turn shalt return thee to thy own realm. ‘Tis simple, Sir Billy. To aid thee, I present this satchel of gold. Enough coin is within to protect thee better for the perils ahead.”

Billy slowly blew air from between his lips and said, “I guess that’s cool.”

“I shall teach thee one more spell: the spell of returning. Cast this spell to return you to the spot where thou hast originally entered this world. It may have other uses, as well.”

The old man handed Billy a slip of parchment.

“Visit the village of Kol to the northeast. Ask for the key-cutter, for he shalt make thee another magic key with which to free the princess from her prison.”

Billy looked at the parchment and then back up at the wizard. “And what, she’s the Sunshine on my Shoulders for me to zap with the Rainbow Twig and make the Rain Bridge to Castle Grayskull?”

The old man patted Billy on the shoulder and said with a consoling grin, “Close enough. Go forth, now, Billy!” The old man then chanted what Billy understood to be the spell of returning and launched himself into the air like a comic book superhero.

“Bungalacious!” Billy said in astonishment as he watched the old man slowly disappear from view.

Billy made his way from Garin’s grave and caught the weapon stall just as it was about to close.

“Gadzooks!” exclaimed the shopkeeper as he was packing his wares. “To what dost I owe this honor, O hero of Garinham?”

Billy threw the satchel of gold at the merchant. “Load me up, amigo!”

Clad in freshly-polished chainmail with a shiny new axe in one hand and a wooden shield in the other, Billy chanted the spell of returning and felt the ground vanish beneath his feet.

Billy whooped and cheered as he shot through the sky like a human bottle rocket. He burst through clouds and felt their hidden rain splash against his face and into his open mouth; he had never before tasted something so refreshing. The ground below was a blur of greens, browns, and grays as he zipped across Alefgard.

Landing in the same soft patch of grass as he did when he first arrived outside of Breconary, Billy diverted south to the bluffs overlooking the sea. The sun was nearly set when he arrived at the precipice separating Tantegel from Charlock.

Even in the dim twilight, Billy could still see the foreboding spires and flapping black flags of the Dragonlord’s lair. Storm clouds swirled around the castle with lightning crashing over and over against its walls.

Billy hunkered down to gaze at the sea below. It churned and foamed like a pot of boiling water. High up though he was, he could make out the shifting forms of sea serpents cresting the waves.

With his jaw set in determination, Billy pointed at Charlock Castle and then slid his thumb, as though it were a knife, across his throat.

“I’m coming for you, Dragonlord,” Billy shouted. “You’re gonna regret ever messing with me and my family!”

Weary from the day, Billy made his way to Breconary and purchased a room at the inn. The innkeeper and his daughter were happy to see him, and Billy was happy to see them. Truth be told, he was even happier to see a bowl of hot stew and a warm bed. That night, Billy slept like the dead.

Chapter 13

He awoke to the patter of rainfall on the roof, a sound significantly more pleasing than the city noises that he was accustomed to. As the kung fu master prepared himself for his next journey, he wondered if the Staff of Rain could turn off like a faucet the spring shower outside. After shaking the staff, twisting it, and talking to it, he accepted that it didn't do anything on its own. Deeming the staff to be dumb, Billy used a bit of twine to secure it to his pack.

After a delightful breakfast and a conversation regarding umbrellas that baffled the innkeeper's daughter ("What is an umbrella?" she had asked), Billy took to the road.

The rain felt magnificently cleansing, unlike the greasy city rain which left him feeling soiled. Though he wasn't one for singing in the rain, Billy's spirits soared to new heights as he approached the woods.

The forest canopy filtered much of the rain into a fine drizzle, but the wetness brought out the most amazing scents from the foliage. It was like the city park multiplied to the point where Billy felt intoxicated by the aroma.

"Nature is totally boss!" he shouted, startling birds into flight.

The forest gave way to hills that curved around craggy mountains. As he made his way through the countryside, he was continually ignored by creatures that would normally attack a lone traveler. Billy treated the monsters with the same indifference, such as when he didn't try to rough up a trio of slimes having a picnic under the shelter of an oak tree.

The rain began to fall harder the further north Billy walked, to the point where his clothes were getting drenched. Billy yet loved the downpour and cried out to the heavens whenever his joy became too much to contain.

Joyousness wasn't long-lasting in the Dragonlord's Alefgard, for soon Billy happened across a poison marsh like the ones spoken of by the

guards in Tantegel. As the bog was between an impassible mountain and the even more impassible sea, traversing it was unavoidable.

The swamp water felt unpleasantly warm through Billy's boots and jeans, not unlike a stranger's hand on his shoulder. Insects buzzed around his face and tried to get into his mouth while misshapen fish waggled against his shins. As crisp and clear as the morning air had been at the start of his trek, the swamp's air was caustic and soupy. Even the rain felt acidic, which in turn made Billy wistful for home.

When Billy hit a deep spot that submersed him to the crotch, the kung fu master sneered and called out, "Grody to the max!"

Thankful to have an axe, he was able to cut through the knobby black branches that hung too low for him to duck under without getting even more slathered with swamp water. Just as his axe hacked through rotten branches, so too his lungs hacked up foul-tasting phlegm.

Soon Billy spotted a patch of land that wasn't submerged in disgusting water. As he tried to quicken his pace, he found that his pack was stuck on something. Axe in hand, he turned to chop the snagging branch, then lowered his jaw upon seeing that he wasn't caught by a branch at all; he was eyeball-to-eye-socket with a skeleton.

Growing up on the streets taught Billy quite a lot about the nature of fear. Fear meant weakness, so Billy had to remain outwardly tough no matter how terrified he was inside. He fought against opponents that no one in their right mind would have otherwise fought, fleeing only when the odds were against him, all because he refused to give in to fear. He soon learned to ignore fear until it was barely an emotion that registered with him.

No matter how ironclad Billy thought his resolve was from a lifetime in city slums, he was not prepared for the fear that came from gazing into the perpetually grinning skull scant inches from his very face. By the same token, the skeleton was not prepared for Billy's reaction of said fear to manifest itself as a punch so powerful that the bone-man's skull popped free from its spinal column and splashed into the fetid water.

The headless skeleton's bony fingers released Billy as its frame sank into the mire. Billy frantically turned to slog out of the moor as quickly as possible, but two more skeletons rose up from the water and blocked his escape. Wearing the tattered tunics that they died in, the undead malefactors brandished rust-encrusted swords.

"Get back, bone-bags!" Billy said before he could prevent his voice from lilting hysterically. "I've beaten up wizards, ghosts, and scumballs – I'm not afraid of you Halloween decorations!"

Billy did not lie in saying that he was not afraid of them; rather, he was terrified of them. Ever since he snuck out of his childhood care home for a late-night showing of *Haunting of Hill House* starring Vincent Price, Billy was irrationally afraid of being murdered by skeletons. He realized how senseless his phobia was, as skeletons only lived inside of people, so he kept this a secret even from Jimmy. To rationalize a phobia was to rationalize a tornado, Billy understood, and just tried his best not to think too much about skeletons getting him.

Now that skeletons were actively trying to get him in real life, Billy couldn't think about anything other than running away. His heart was beating so fast that it broke the concentration necessary to cast any of his magic spells, chief among them the spell of returning that he desperately wanted to cast so that he could get as far away as possible.

The skeletons slowly encroached on Billy, pointing their swords with ill intent. Without thinking, he backed up directly to where the first skeleton had fallen. He could barely scream when bony fingers curled around his ankle.

Launching into a panic, Billy kicked so hard that the skull-less skeleton's body launched itself from the swamp and into the air. That the fiend did not release its grip was its own undoing, for the force of Billy's kick caused the backlash to snap the skeleton's arm off at the elbow.

Still screaming, Billy ran up to the bank of the swamp and collapsed into the mud. Caring little for anything other than getting the skeletal hand off of his ankle, he tugged and kicked until he was finally able to pry it loose. The kung fu master calmly stood up, brushed himself off, and then ran shrieking into the thicket with his arms flailing about above his head.

Chapter 14

Despite sucking in huge lungfuls of befouled swamp air, Billy Lee's athletic prowess allowed him to sprint quite a distance before he fully exerted himself. As Billy's horror waned into exhaustion, he crouched beneath a weeping willow to catch his breath. His panic left his face and hands lacerated from tumbling through thorny swamp foliage while his jeans and armor were encrusted with mud.

Billy slumped against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. Relaxing though the rainfall, the kung fu master was nowhere close to being at ease. As he fought fantastical creatures and learned the arcane arts, he felt like Tom Cruise in *Legend* – he was a man on a mission! As he stewed in the noxious bog, however, he felt more like Atreyu losing Artax in *The NeverEnding Story*. He was scared, lost, and, worst of all, alone.

Though he grew up without parents, Billy seldom felt alone with his brother his side. They looked out for one another in a way that only brothers could, and together they stood up against the Black Warriors and stopped their evil schemes. When word got to them that Marian was kidnapped, Billy knew that he and his brother could get her back. They were an unstoppable force together, but alone Billy felt as easily stopped as a robbery in a doughnut shop.

Having the wits scared out of him by his most irrational fear come to life led him to believe that both he and his quest were truly lost causes. The people who lived in a world where monsters and magic were real could barely cope, so how was Billy, a total outsider, to become their hero? He couldn't face down the walking dead without losing his nerve.

Further doubts bubbled to the surface. How could Billy know for sure that the old wizard would ever truly help him when each of Billy's successes was undermined by a plethora of further adversities? If Billy were to save Princess Gwaelin and defeat the Dragonlord, how would that get him home? Would the king merely make Billy the royal errand boy?

He continued to sulk and brood and sigh until his funk was interrupted by the distant baying of something not quite natural.

“Great,” said Billy with his knees drawn up to his chest and his head in his hands. “Another monster or something coming to eat me or push me down or whatever. This is, like, totally heinous.”

The howling began again, so Billy stood up onto his aching feet and shuffled deeper into the swamp. Despite himself, Billy tensed each time he heard howling. It only made him feel less of a man and more of a wuss. He felt like giving up and letting the swamp take him.

Billy suddenly stopped walking. Since when did he ever think such things? Billy Lee would never give up or give in! He also would never talk smack about himself. He was a kung fu wizard, after all!

“This skuzzy air is pumping my brain full of downers! I’ve gotta get outta here! Just say no to swamp gas!”

The rain had stopped, so Billy unhooked his axe from his belt and covered it in magical flame. As he ran, he whirled his axe before him with the dazzling finesse of a fire dancer. Undergrowth burned away beneath his blows as he raced through the mud. The fire also burned away the scummy marsh fumes, leaving Billy to feel more like himself again with every bound.

As Billy ran, he could hear something crashing though the charred brush left in his wake. No sooner had he escaped the nastiness of the swamp than a beast launched itself at Billy. With his senses heightened from the adrenaline, he anticipated the attack and sent the creature flying with an over-the-shoulder toss. The beast skidded in the grass and halted its trajectory by raking its claw into the ground. When the monster righted itself to face its opponent, Billy saw clearly that he had just kung fu flipped a living, breathing wolf-man. Billy was stoked.

The wolf-man reared back and let loose an ear-splitting howl. Left with only a slight tinnitus, Billy caught the beast in the throat with the edge of his shield. The half-wolf, half-man’s eyes bulged as it staggered back and wrapped its sharp claws around its throat. Its coughs sounded like a dog snarling at a failing motorboat engine.

Billy took advantage of the wolf-man’s daze and kicked it in the side. When he whirled around to kick again, the wolf-man predicted the blow and caught the kick in its claw. The wolf-man hoisted Billy by the leg and then slammed him into the ground before Billy could even register what had happened. Reflexes kicked in and Billy brought up his shield when the wolf-man pinned him down and began tearing at him with razor-sharp claws. Deflecting most of the blows with his shield, Billy

chopped blindly with his axe. Billy scored a blow to the wolf-man's arm. The monster howled in pain and intensified the attack.

Without thinking the situation through, Billy chanted the first half of his spell of returning; both he and the wolf-man soared into the air. Before they were ten feet off the ground, he looped his arms around the bewildered beast's furry body, grappled his foe into a suplex, and put his full weight into their impact as they crashed to the earth. The wolf-man's body went slack as soon as they hit the wet ground.

Billy raised his fists to the air and shouted, "K.O.!"

Chapter 15

Like a jumbo jet of muscle and attitude, Billy Lee bolted through the forests surrounding Kol by means of his half-cast spell of returning. Kicking up dust and avoiding trees, he felt like Luke Skywalker racing his speeder bike on the moon of Endor. It was invigorating!

When he saw the buildings of Kol crest the horizon, Billy intensified his concentration to give himself a turbo boost. He stopped just short of Kol's welcome sign, startling the guard at the entrance.

"Forsooth!" the guard cried with his hand on his head in disbelief. "Thou art surely the descendent of Erdrick come to save us from the vile clutches of the Dragonlord!"

Billy breathed on his fingernails and rubbed them against his chest. "I'm probably like ten times better than that Erdrick dude," he said with a slanted grin. "I totally body-slammed Lon Chaney, Jr. and was in no way scared by a bunch of skeletons. Plus, I found a harp and junk. Pretty radical, bro."

The guard blinked at Billy and said, "I hath no idea what thou art saying."

Billy patted the guard on the shoulder as he walked past him. "Right back at you, amigo. Catch you on the flipside."

It was past lunchtime, so Billy looked for a place to sate his hunger. He found a man in the market district selling roasted turkey legs, so he bought two. Double-fisting his lunch, Billy wandered about the shops looking for the key-cutter.

Growing impatient in his search, he called to a bored-looking youth slumped over a shop counter. "Yo, man!" Billy shouted. "Wake up, guy! Where's the key-cutter at?"

The lad shrugged and shook his head. "The key-cutter be not in Kol, brave sir."

“Say what?” said Billy around a mouthful of turkey. “The old man said to ask for the key-cutter in this joint. Where’s the beef, huh?” Billy leaned in close to the youth and asked again, “Where’s the beef, man?”

The young man’s face whitened and his eyes darted around anxiously. “Please, good sir, pummel me not! I hath no inkling as to where the beef-man is, but thou must go to Rimuldar to find the key-cutter.”

“So why didn’t the old dude tell me that to begin with?”

Before the youth could find an earnest answer to the rhetorical question, a sandpaper laugh came from behind Billy.

“What gives, pappy? You send me here because the drumsticks are so good? Because they, like, totally are.”

With a chuckle, the old man answered, “Nay, Sir Billy. Thou must find the Fairy Flute to...”

Billy cocked his neck back and, with a burning intensity, stared down at the wizard. “Are you serious? I have to find another magic thingy to find some other magic thingy? Well that’s fine, dude, because I totally kicked out the jams with your return spell. Now I know your secret for getting around so fast! I ain’t ever seen you on no horse, that’s for sure. Anyway, bro, where’s this flute?”

The old man pointed to the fountain at the center of town. “Tis four paces south of yonder fountain.”

Billy tossed the remains of his turkey drumsticks over his shoulders, sucked the grease from his fingers, and then walked to the fountain. The old man was telling the truth, for lying in the grass exactly four strides to the south was the Fairy Flute.

The kung fu master picked up the flute and turned it over in his hands. “So what, does this carry me off to some secret room if I blow into it?”

“Nay, Sir Billy,” said the old man as Billy blew experimental tunes into the flute, and then scowled at it when nothing magical happened. “The Fairy Flute shalt put to slumber the golem guarding Rimuldar. Follow the path south and thou shalt reach thy destination.”

“I don’t know what a golem is, but I’m gonna bust it up for getting in the way of those keys.” Billy put the flute in his pack and chanted enough of the spell of returning to send him into the air.

“Up, up, and away!” echoed his voice as he became a blur in the afternoon sun.

A smile crossed the old man's face briefly before he too launched himself into the sky.

Chapter 16

The wind blowing through Billy's red hair as he darted across the plains felt as though he was driving an invisible convertible through a tornado. He increased his altitude and soared over the treetops of the nearby forest. Gazing down at the woods, he noticed one of the trees shaking. Thinking nothing of it, Billy continued south along the path.

Then he heard the beating of wings.

Gazing over his shoulder, he expected to see a hawk or an eagle or some other bird of prey. What he instead saw made him cry out: a wyvern was closing in on him. It reared back its bald, vulture-like head and screeched. The monster's thick, snake-like body acted as a rudder to steer it above Billy and prime its strike.

Hearing the monster's filthy wings flapping above him, Billy spun in midair and attempted to punch the creature in its gizzard. He was unsuccessful, for blasts of flame erupted from the wyvern's carrion-flecked beak just as the kung-fu wizard turned about. The fire burned Billy's incoming fist and made him lose his concentration.

The wyvern coiled its scaly tail around Billy's waist and breathed in deeply to rekindle its internal flamethrower. Unable to unhook his axe or retrieve his shield, Billy did the only thing that he could think of in the situation: he clamped down with both hands onto the monster's beak. When the creature exhaled, fire harmlessly tootled out of its nostrils.

As the monster struggled to free Billy's grip on its bill, its tail constricted tighter around Billy's midsection. Feeling his lunch wanting to squeeze out of him like toothpaste from a tube, Billy had to act fast. He slid his burned hand from the wyvern's beak and punched the beast in its neck-frill. The wyvern squawked and broke loose of Billy's grip.

Billy attempted the incantation for the hurting spell, but he was quickly distracted by the wyvern closing its beak around his head. Billy hollered in pain as the monster tried to crack open his skull like a walnut. Flailing about in an effort to break loose, Billy slid his hands under the

monster's wings and clutched for leverage in a gambit to kick free. In response, the wyvern jostled and made a little sound. Billy clutched under its wings again and the monster released its vice grip from Billy's head so that it could emit peals of laughter.

"Coochie-coochie-coo?" Billy said quizzically as he ruffled his fingers in the creature's feathers.

"Bloo-hoo-haugh!" laughed the wyvern as it slid its tail from around Billy.

"Tickle monster! Tickle monster!" cried Billy as he danced his fingers around the monster's downy collar. The creature roared with laughter and then, having fully disentangled from Billy, flew away. Its giggling echoed through the valley below.

As Billy watched the monster fade from view, he rubbed his sore head and said, "This has to be the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me." After a moment he added, "So far."

Upon curing his wounds with magic, Billy continued to bolt south until he could see the village and the surrounding lake.

Billy's landing kicked up dirt and rustled nearby grass. He could see a brick wall blocking the bridge leading to Rimuldar. As Billy walked closer, he realized that the brick wall actually had arms, legs, and a head. It was no brick wall, but a brick wall man!

Standing on slab-like feet and towering fifteen feet high, the golem took up with its sturdy frame nearly the entire mouth of the bridge. Billy could see that its cylindrical head had no face, but rather a dark, rectangular recess where two white lights glowed dimly. The fabricated man did not react to Billy's approach.

From his pack Billy withdrew the Fairy Flute. He moistened his lips with his tongue and then blew into the instrument. His rendition of the synthesizer introduction from Europe's "The Final Countdown" came out sounding more like a goose with pneumonia. The golem stepped forward and reared back its gargantuan fist. Billy frantically tried to imitate the saxophone solo from "Careless Whisper," the guitar lick from "Blitzkrieg Bop," and the theme song from *Sanford and Son* before the golem's enormous stone fist crashed into Billy's small fleshy body. The blow struck with enough force to send him into the air and the Fairy Flute out of his grip.

As Billy tumbled he whispered enough of the returning spell to reverse the arc of his flight. Just before he fired himself foot-first into the golem, he self-immolated to perform the Fire-Breathing Dragon Kick.

When Billy's foot struck the golem's wide shoulder, he could hear the sound of his own leg shattering from the impact.

When Billy hit the ground, his mind went blank from the pain. He lacked the concentration to cast the spell of healing, the Fairy Flute was missing, and, worst of all, the golem was stomping toward him. Just when he thought that all was lost, he remembered the herbs that he found in Garin's grave.

Finding the packet of herbs, he pulled one free from its binding and rubbed it against his gums. It had no effect, so he chewed and swallowed a bit. When his leg still felt like it was filled with broken glass, he choked down the rest of the herb and then rubbed more herbs against his leg. Unsure of which two things did the trick, he could feel his bones knitting back together. It was amazing!

Leaping to his feet just in time to see the golem grip both of its hands together for an overhead haymaker, Billy made music the only way he knew how: he beatboxed.

As Billy busted out beats with his lips and tongue, the golem cocked its head to the side and crossed its arms. Then it began tapping its foot. Soon, the golem was popping and locking to the beat and Billy knew what he had to do.

My name is Billy Lee and I'm here to say, I love karate choppin' in an old-school way.

I came to Alefgard from a hole in the floor, the King said, "What up?" and then he showed me the door.

I punched out slimes and made mad rhymes, I stopped the magicians from committing more crimes.

The drakees I cold-cocked, the ghosts I body-rocked, I be shootin' fireballs and leavin' y'all shell-shocked.

Skeletons can't scare me, I need that magic key, I don't know what city is the capital of Tennessee.

I'm gonna save my bro, I'm gonna save my girl, I'm gonna punch the Dragonlord until he does hurl.

I make this golem dance, I put it in a trance, then into Rimuldar I surely will prance.

I'm done with this rap, it was probably crap, but that brick house man done took a nap.

Quietly, the golem closed its eyes and settled into sleep. Billy waved his hand in front of the golem to make sure that it truly was asleep before he ran past it and onto the bridge to Rimuldar.

Chapter 17

When Billy crossed the bridge into Rimuldar, he was met by a woman with terror in her eyes.

“Thou hast defeated the golem?” the woman asked. “The golem grants us protection from evil creatures what lurk beyond our hamlet’s walls.”

“Nah,” said Billy reassuringly. “I put him to sleep with a relaxing beat. I’m just here for some keys.”

Looking relieved, the woman pointed down the road and gave Billy directions to the key-cutter’s shop.

A bell jingled at the door. The walls were covered with keys of all shapes and sizes. He browsed through them but could not find one that resembled the magic key.

“Magic keys!” blurted a sprightly voice from behind the counter, startling Billy. “They wilt unlock any door. Dost thou wish to purchase one?”

Billy approached the counter and looked down on the small, bearded man who had presumably been standing there the entire time. With his stocking cap and bright attire, the man resembled a garden gnome.

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but are you a midget?”

The tiny man stroked his beard. “Nay, stranger! I be a dwarf!”

“Oh, right. I forgot that you guys didn’t like being called midgets. Anyway, I got some beef with you about your magic keys. They disappear when you use them!”

The dwarf smiled. “But of course they do. They are magic keys, made from magic!”

Billy shook his head. "I'm not going to tell you how to run your business, little dude, but magic keys should work forever. That's good magic. Keys that disappear when you use them is bad magic."

The dwarf climbed up a wooden stool. "Sir," said the dwarf, puffing up out his chest. "Thou art calling me a charlatan?"

"I don't know what that word means, but you need to give me a key that won't disappear. I need to save the princess and probably do some other stuff too, so I can't have no unreliable keys getting me locked out and stuff."

The dwarf furrowed his brow and raised his shoulders. "If thou need to open multiple doors, then thou must buy multiple keys."

Billy slammed his hands on the table hard enough to wobble the dwarf's stool. "You gonna play it like that, huh? You just gonna play it like that? Fine then! Give me one," Billy raised his forefinger for effect, "magic key."

The dwarf presented him with one key. He threw some gold coins on the table and opened the shop's door, but he did not go out.

"What art thou doing?" asked the dwarf.

Billy said, "I'm gonna try something," and locked the door.

"Use not the key," said the dwarf with an anxious inflection in his voice. "Thou shalt lose the key upon its use and, heheh, thou shalt just have to...thou shalt just have to buy another!"

Fitting the key into the lock, Billy glared at the key-cutter and turned the key. As he felt the key disappear from his hand and heard the lock open, he saw the key reappear on the shopkeeper's counter.

"Aha!" shouted Billy. "You little fink!" He stormed to the counter and raised the small man up by his shoulders. "I outta throw you against the golem and see how far you'll bounce!"

Tears ran down the dwarf's beard. "Please, sir. Please do not hurt me, 'tis not my doing. I must enchant the keys in such a way lest the Dragonlord smite my family."

The anger bled out of Billy's face and he set the small man back down upon the stool. "What do you mean?"

The dwarf wiped away his tears and sighed. "I apologize for being so un-dwarf-like with emotion, but I hath been under a great amount of stress. The Dragonlord hath created locked doors throughout the kingdom that may only be opened by magical keys that only I know how to cut. He doth need me alive to ensure that the keys work for him, 'tis

why he had me craft the golem to keep his minions out of Rimuldar. Should I ever break the spell of the magical key, he shalt know and he shalt strike down my family. Please understand, sir.”

“I understand, bro. Man, the Dragonlord jerk sure has everyone by the tchotchkes, doesn’t he? Don’t worry, little dude. I’m on a mission to beat up this jerk so that he can’t ever hurt anyone again.” Billy emptied his sack of its coins, laying every last one on the dwarf’s counter. “Lemme have a half-dozen of your magical keys. I need to get Princess Gwendy out of that swamp cave.”

“Sir, thou art brave and strong, but wearing such attire shalt surely result in thy untimely death.” The dwarf hopped down from his stool and, with much grunting, pushed a chest from behind his counter and out where Billy could open it. Inside was a suit of shining armor with a matching broadsword and shield.

“This armor shalt protect you from the dragon’s flames, and the sword shalt pierce the dragon’s scales.”

“Whoa, dude! This is like some King Arthur stuff! Where’d you get it?”

“These were commissioned by a warrior in thy very same position. Sadly, he never arrived to receive them. I cannot say for certain if it be the golem that warded him away or if his foolishness was so great as to fight the dragon without my wares. I shall never know.”

“Bummer, dude. Still, you get a high-five for the generosity!” Without thinking, Billy held his hand up, but the dwarf was too short to reach. Billy knelt down and instead settled for a low-five.

He found that the armor fit him perfectly, as though it was tailored specifically to his beefy frame. It was sturdy enough to cover his body and yet light enough for him to still move around comfortably. He did a few kung fu moves to ensure that the plating didn’t hinder his dexterity and was pleased to see that it did not.

Sliding his vest on over his armor, Billy sheathed his new sword and picked up his pack of gear.

“Thanks so much, little dude. Soon, you and your family will be able to sleep at night without worrying about getting smitten.” With a nod and a thumbs-up, Billy left the key-cutter’s store and launched himself into the air.

When the door closed behind Billy, the key-cutter laughed, a sound like dried leaves tumbling across the road.

Chapter 18

Billy took solace in the dwindling daylight, for he did not look forward to treading back into the swamp. It was not that he feared the swamp or its fiendish denizens, but rather he feared that the toxins would again do to his brain what they did during his first excursion. Billy steered clear of mind-altering substances in his recreational activities, so he definitely did not want to experience any more paranoid episodes while he endeavored to save the princess.

It was difficult for Billy to fly quickly through the swamp, so he instead hovered slightly above the muck. With his broadsword in one hand and his axe in the other, he chopped through the gnarled branches and twisted limbs that entwined throughout the swamp path. He knew that if he went too far north he would end up in Kol, so he searched for any clues telling him where a dragon might dwell.

As Billy trundled deeper into the swamp, the rotten air began to smell less musky and more like mesquite. The aroma of bonfire was coming from the east, so Billy set off in that direction. As he floated and chopped his way through the swamp, he could see more telltale signs of dragon-life: an enormous footprint in the mud, a fallen and charred tree from where the dragon tussled with something (likely its dinner), and what Billy could only describe as dragon dung.

The smell of burning grew stronger, but with it something pleasant, almost like something baking. Considering how many times Billy's nose has been broken from his years of brawling, it was difficult for Billy to fully ascertain smells at the best of times. As such, he didn't put much stock in the underlying fragrance.

Billy picked through fronds and reeds until he saw smoke trailing up in the distance. Hastily, Billy sliced his way through bushes, held his breath through clouds of insects, and flew across the stagnant water. Soon, the kung fu warrior found the entrance to the swamp cave. Billy knew before the night was through that Princess Gwaelin would be home

safely and the warrior would be one step closer to both finding his brother and returning safely to his own home.

The heavenly smell of baked goods was definitely mingling with the smoke that wafted out from the cave. Had Billy not been hovering above a poisonous quagmire, he would have savored the smell. In the swamp, however, the happy smell was soured by the stench of things long-rotted.

As Billy approached the cave, the water below him began to bubble. One by one, skeletal warriors rose up from the muck. Their bent swords and charred armor told Billy that the skeletons were once knights brave enough to enter the swamp but not wily enough to leave with the princess.

The skeletons stood in place, their hollow sockets fixing their eternal stare on Billy. As he stared back, he could hear their lamentations on the wind.

She was to be my bride.

My parents are never to see me again.

I should have retrieved the armor from that dwarf.

The whispers started as a slow current, but they crashed into one another like surf until they became a tidal wave. Billy could not block out the sound and was soon overwhelmed by the dirge of the slain. He could take no more.

“Put a sock in it!” he roared. Where the voices stopped, the clattering of bones and the scraping of stained metal sounded; the skeletons drew near.

Billy psyched himself up and made an internal vow not to run from the skeletons no matter how scary they were up close. Drawing his sword and retrieving his axe, Billy cried out and rushed into battle.

Axe and broadsword separated skulls from spines and hands from arms. Rusted armor and charred shields were torn into as if made of paper. Corroded blades shattered against tempered steel.

Billy felt as though he were battling his subconscious to free himself from his irrational fear. Even as more and more skeletal knights rose from the swamp, he did not let his fear overwhelm him.

When his rattling foes closed in around him, Billy used his magic to fly high into the air. As the skeletons gathered together and looked up at him, the kung fu wizard hurdled himself to the ground fist-first. Just before his impact, he ignited and then, like a human meteorite, crashed

into the swamp. Under his explosive punch, water turned to steam and skeletons blew to pieces.

Panting from the exertion, Billy looked around to see if any more slain warriors would rise up from their murky graves. When none did, Billy followed the bakery scents into the dragon's lair.

Stagnant water only trickled in to the entrance of the swamp cave, but its walls were still slick with condensation. The sound of water dripping from stalactites accompanied the echoing of Billy's boots. Even through his armor, he could feel the mugginess of the cave; the temperature only rose as he walked deeper in.

Though Billy realized too late that he left his torch behind when he found the silver harp, he made his own light by magically lighting himself aflame. The cave's passages forked off into twists and turns, but Billy followed the trail of fragrant smoke to its end.

After a sweltering walk down a long passage, Billy found smoke pouring out from the spaces around a huge door. It bore the same runic markings as the door in Garin's grave, but this door was locked. Billy knew that only a magic key would open it and that Gwaelin had to be somewhere on the other side. His heart raced as he felt his key vanish after unlocking the door. Smoke and light spilled out from behind the door as he opened it and stepped inside.

Chapter 19

Having never seen a dragon before outside of television and movies, Billy wasn't quite sure what to expect one to look like in real life. When he stepped beyond the magic door, no amount of cartoons or comic books could have prepared him for what he saw.

The dragon stood upright on its huge and scaly legs, with its long tail swishing absently on the cave floor. The spikes from its tail ran up the length of its spine and ended at the base of its neck. Its angular head had fin-like ears and two horns jutting up from its skull. Between the two horns was a chef's toque, and around its forest green body was an apron. Billy couldn't quite see what the apron said, but he believed it to read, "Kiss thy cook."

The smoke swirling on the ceiling and trailing out of the entrance was from an enormous open oven. With a big wooden spoon, the dragon stirred a cauldron perched above the flames and then retrieved with its bare claw a pan from the oven. It wasn't bread that Billy had smelled in the swamp, but rather a cake. The dragon hummed as it set the cake down upon the trivets sitting on a rectangular table.

Billy wasn't quite sure how to approach a cake-baking dragon, so he cleared his throat to make his presence known. The dragon was still humming and stirring its pot. Billy cleared his throat again, louder this time. The dragon's ears twitched and the great beast whirled around.

"Greetings," said the dragon in a deep, booming voice. "I did not hear thy approach." The dragon grinned, revealing a terrifying number of too-sharp teeth.

"I'm here for..."

The dragon laughed and waved its claw dismissively. "Yes, yes. As with so many before thee, thou art here to rescue Princess Gwaelin. Thou hast no idea how boring it is to slay knight after knight night after night. As thou can see, I hath taken up the art of baking to cut the tedium. Ugh, and the tedium would be bearable if the princess were not so

insufferable. I'll have thee know, she hath no sense of humor about her predicament. So mournful! I long for the day when my master gives the command to eat her so that I can be done with this nonsense."

Billy was appalled. "That's appalling!" he said.

The dragon snorted and rolled its eyes. "So sayeth thou. Dost thou give any thought to the chicken or the pig before thou stuffeth thy face with their innards?"

Billy rubbed his chin and then shrugged. "I guess not, but man, they're not people!"

"People, hah! Such high regard for themselves ever since the day that they realized how their opposable thumbs could be used for more than merely plugging their rear-ends. Dragons, dear Billy, are superior."

Billy scoffed. "Gag me with a spoon, dude. Just 'cause you can talk and bake and kidnap babes doesn't mean you're superior. I'm gonna show you just how superior we really are!"

The dragon sneered as it cast aside its hat and apron. "Thou art just as self-righteous as every other paladin that set foot in my kitchen," the dragon snarled. "Come! Let me show you how many definitions thou canst attribute to the word 'pain!'" The dragon reared back and let loose so loud a roar that Billy could feel it just as much as he could hear it.

"Bring it on!"

The dragon exhaled white-hot flames that licked the area where Billy once was. Assuming correctly that a dragon's first attack would be fiery breath, Billy launched himself into the air, somersaulted over the beast, and came down hard with his sword. The blade stabbed through the dragon's shoulder, eliciting another roar from the monster.

The dragon lunged at Billy and caught him around the waist in its teeth. Though the fangs did not penetrate his armor, the pressure made him cry out in pain. Having left his sword in the dragon's shoulder, he frantically bashed the creature's face with his shield before the dragon spat him out across the room and into the spice cabinet.

"Oh dear," said the dragon with sarcasm dripping from its thunderous voice. "Thou tasted favorable before, but now thy flavor has been improved immensely. Here, let me have another bite."

Before the dragon could snap its jaws around Billy, the kung fu wizard rolled out of the way and punched the dragon in its eye. It bellowed in pain and used its tail to slap Billy to the ground. The weight of the dragon's tail coupled with the sudden impact to the floor left Billy

in a daze. When he tried to stand, he lost his balance and knocked over the dragon's dinner table.

Clutching its eye with one claw, the dragon scooped Billy up in its other. "Thou art wily, but thou hast no future after choosing to battle against a dragon."

"I'm not about to go out like this, you overfed iguana! Your mother was a snowblower!"

The dragon squeezed Billy tighter. "My mother was no such thing, blackguard! I shalt kill thee for saying so!" Before the dragon could bite Billy's head off, the warrior busted a flex so hard that he broke the dragon's grip.

"Macho madness!" Billy shouted as he launched into the air. The warrior kicked off the wall and fired himself like a cannonball at the dragon. As the dragon breathed fire, Billy engulfed himself in his own magical flames and powered through the blast unharmed. The dragon was unprepared for this and took Billy's flying elbow strike square in the mouth. Shaking off the blow, the dragon swiped at Billy with its claws and roared fiercely when the warrior eluded his grasp.

Billy ducked around behind the dragon and jump-kicked it in the flank. The dragon spun around to breathe out more flames but was caught in the chin by Billy's uppercut. As the dragon stumbled back, Billy used the spell of returning to hurl into the air and deliver a spin-kick that smashed the dragon's head against the cave ceiling. The monster landed flat on the ground and Billy could practically see little yellow birds spinning around its head. With a grunt and a puff of smoke, the dragon closed its eyes and went limp.

"What a rush!" Billy shouted as he retrieved his sword and shield. Not one to let food go to waste, Billy gouged out a handful of the dragon's cake, was delighted by its taste, and then went off to find the princess.

Chapter 20

The dragon's kitchen lead into what Billy presumed was its living room. There was a small bookshelf (which Billy found filled mostly with cookbooks) and a pile of treasure that Billy assumed was where the dragon slept. He pocketed a few handfuls from the dragon's hoard and continued to the next room. The door was locked, so Billy used another of his magic keys.

There, sitting on a small bench, was the princess.

Before Billy could say anything, he was taken aback by her appearance. When he pictured the iconic damsel in distress, he immediately thought of his own: blonde, busty, and toned. While Princess Gwaelin was certainly busty, her hair was long and red, and her physique was anything but toned.

Bursting out of a golden-colored dress that looked as though it would have been tight 100 pounds ago, Princess Gwaelin daintily nibbled on a slice of cake. When she noticed Billy, she called out in surprise and dropped her plate.

"Thou hast come to save me?" she called, tears of joy streaming down her ruddy cheeks.

"Um, yeah, that's, uh, the plan! You...uh, you don't look like any princess I've seen before."

The princess looked down at herself and attempted to cover up the bits of chub bulging from the tears in her dress. Her red cheeks turned even redder.

"Gaze not upon me, brave hero, for I have fallen victim to the dragon's tortures. My beauty is gone, instead replaced by unsightly fat!" Tears of joy turned into tears of sadness as Gwaelin began to sob.

Billy felt like a jerk of the highest caliber. "Hey, Gwildor, don't cry. I didn't say that you looked ugly or nothing." The closer that Billy got to the princess, the more he noticed that she was in fact quite beautiful.

She also smelled good, had impeccable skin, and was pleasantly soft when he touched her shoulder to comfort her.

As Billy thought back, he couldn't remember a time where he was exposed to a girl of her size. The girls on the streets were either strung out or were health nuts like Marian. Gwaelin may have more than a few extra pounds, but she had substance. Billy was beginning to think that he liked that.

"You're not ugly at all." Billy said reassuringly. "In fact, I think you're like totally a smoking-hot babe." He knew that Marian would kill him for saying something like that to another girl, but he would worry about that later.

"Thou art teasing me. I was svelte and graceful until the dragon captured me. He hath fattened me up with delicious cakes, saying that I shalt taste all the sweeter when the time comes for him to eat me. At first I refused, but cake baked with dragon's fire is irresistible." Gwaelin pressed down onto her belly and hips and then wailed, "See what they've done to me? 'Tis a dreadful fate to be forced to eat such tasty things!"

Billy went *psst* and moved both of his hands to the side as though he were physically pushing her comments away. "Ain't no thing, Gwennifer. Lemme take you home and we can find some magic liposuction spell or something." When Gwaelin stood and Billy got a look at her backside, he bit down onto his armored knuckle and then added, "Or, y'know, this could be a good look for you. You should just be yourself. Guys like self-confidence."

Gwaelin turned and smiled. "Thou art sweet. What is thy name?"

"Billy. Billy Lee."

Gwaelin wiped away her tears and leapt up to hug Billy. He staggered back under her weight, but hugged her back. She was so soft and pillowy, like a princess-shaped marshmallow.

"It is a genuine pleasure to meet you," she said. "Thou canst call me Gwaelin."

Billy snapped his fingers in irritation. "I knew it was something like that. Okay, Gwaelin, let's get you home."

"The way is treacherous and I fear that I shan't have the constitution to withstand the hazards. Billy, wilt thou carry me?"

Billy sighed at the thought, but then imagined about how he would have her backside pressed against him the entire way and let out a different sort of sigh.

“You can ride me all...I mean, oh, snap!” Billy swept his arms under Gwaelin’s leg and back and, with great effort, hoisted her up. “Uh, let’s just get going!”

Gwaelin whooped with joy and kissed Billy on his cheek. His face turned red and he wobbled, but didn’t fall down.

Chapter 21

Night fell. The moonlit bog did not instill fear into the warrior, for he had enough on his mind clutching Princess Gwaelin tightly in his arms. Feeling her soft and warm body so close gave him a hot urge for a cold shower. As they stepped out of the clammy cave, Billy breathed the cool marsh air deeply and immediately coughed it back out.

He felt Gwaelin shiver from the cold, which in turn gave him whole different kind of shiver. “Sir Billy,” she said, “I am used to the comforting warmth of dragon’s fire. ‘Tis too chilled in this wilderness for me to carry on with my dress so torn. Canst thou please find a way to keep me warm?” Billy felt every male urge at once when he saw her bite her lip and bat her eyelashes. He did the only thing he knew how to do: he burst into flames.

“Ooh!” the princess cooed. “Thou art truly a resourceful knight to blanket us in flames that do not hurt. What is thy secret?”

Billy looked deeply into the hazel mocha of her eyes and said, “I’m totally a wizard.”

The flame was a mere spark in comparison to the inferno burning in his heart. Eyes locked, the two leaned in closer to one another. As they leaned in even closer, a cacophony of rattling broke them back into reality.

From all around the couple came a jangle of bones and oxidized metal as the horde of twice-vanquished dead drew near. They did not draw their weapons, but rather they softly whispered.

She is safe.

The dragon is bested.

We can rest.

With a collective sigh, the skeletons clattered into the swamp, never to rise again.

“Father hath sent forth so many brave souls to fetch me. My heart is devastated to be responsible for so many deaths. Oh, Sir Billy, hold me.” Tears sizzled in the flames as they ran from her eyes and down her cheeks.

Billy held her tighter and scowled. “It wasn’t your fault, babe. It’s that Dragonlord messin’ with everyone’s lives! He’s, like, gotta pay for all the whacked out junk he’s done. I’ll make him answer for what he did to you and everyone else. But first, we gotta get you home.” Billy chanted the full spell of return and the two were flying into the night sky.

Gwaelin whooped with delight as she hung on to Billy. “Such incredible wonder! I feel as though I have become a bird!”

“Check this out!” Billy soared higher into the air and burst into a cloud. The fire surrounding him and the princess evaporated the cloud before they could taste the rain, but they both giggled all the same.

Billy looped and twirled while Gwaelin squealed and cheered. Lit aflame as they were, they resembled a falling star on the horizon. Billy snickered to himself at the thought of how many children made wishes on his and Gwaelin’s return home.

When the two landed in the clearing where Billy first arrived in Alefgard, the moon was bright and high in the sky. Though Gwaelin was too comfortable in Billy’s fiery embrace for him to cease his fire magic, the moon was still necessary to help them see their way in the darkness.

As they approached Breconary, the night watchmen jumped to attention and cried out to them.

“Princess Gwaelin!”

“Be this some wicked trick? Canst it be true that thou hast returned?”

Billy turned off his fire and Gwaelin happily shouted, “It is I!”

The guards bowed at Billy’s feet as he brought the princess to the gates. When the gates opened, the townsfolk who had heard the commotion were already gathering to witness Gwaelin’s arrival. Clad in their evening clothes, they applauded and cheered. As the two walked through the streets, townspeople reached out to touch the hero and the princess as if to see whether or not they were real.

When Billy overheard a housewife quietly gossip about Gwaelin’s voluptuous frame, Billy told the woman to pipe down and suggested that she herself was jealous. The woman thrust her nose into the air and went back into her home.

The guards hurriedly guided the townsfolk out of Billy's way so that he could hasten to the gates of Tantegel Castle. As the group passed the smithy, Billy saw the one-eyed blacksmith standing in front of his cooled forge. With a proud smile on his face, he shared a nod with the warrior.

The innkeeper and his daughter waited at the gates of Tantegel so that they could thank Billy for his efforts. Billy, in turn, thanked them for the best cooking and hospitality he had had in his entire life. Though they quickly merged into the crowd, Billy could hear the innkeeper's daughter shout parting words of thanks.

Despite the lateness of the evening, the castle was filled with more hustle and bustle than Billy had seen prior. Servants gasped upon seeing the princess and some of them fainted. Others asked her what happened to make her so large, whereas others minded their tongues. The princess told everyone who had asked about her buoyancy that the dragon tormented her with cakes too tasty to be believed.

With Gwaelin still in his arms, Billy was quickly ushered into the throne room. Even dressed in his bedtime robes and long johns, the King still maintained his regal appearance.

"My daughter," he stated as he stood from the throne. He descended the throne's stairs and met Billy in the center of the chamber. "Thou hast returned my Gwaelin to me," he said.

Billy put Gwaelin down and she immediately embraced her father. "I hath missed thee so very much. I love thee with my entire heart."

King Lorik hugged his daughter tightly and, as if only then noticing the sad state of her clothing, began to frown. "What hath transpired to leave thee in such a state of disrepair? And hath thou grown rounder, my dear?"

"Father, 'twas the dragon that hath done this to me. I am ashamed to say that I hath outgrown my dress thanks to the monster's exemplary baking prowess."

The king looked baffled. "Dragons...baking? 'Tis a foul world we live in thanks to the Dragonlord." King Lorik turned his attentions to Billy. "Sir Billy, thou truly art the descendent of Erdrick to bring my daughter home. For thy victory, I shall grant thee the Stones of Sunlight."

A servant brought forth a small chest containing three brightly-shining oblong stones.

“Though thou canst use them with thy Staff of Rain to create the Rainbow Drop, thou can only cross the bridge whilst wearing Erdrick’s armor.”

Too swept up in the emotion of the moment to complain about such an important detail being left out, Billy merely nodded. “Where can I find this armor, your majesty?”

“Thou shalt find it in the desert far to the southwest. ‘Twas held by the sages at Hauksness, a village which hath been destroyed by the Dragonlord’s minions as a means of showing us the extent of his vile powers.”

Gwaelin handed Billy a watchwork device that resembled a compass. “I gift thee with my love, Sir Billy. Follow it straight and true to Erdrick’s armor. I believe in thee.”

Billy accepted the gift and kissed Gwaelin on her warm, soft cheek.

The king cleared his throat sternly. “Thou shalt leave in the morning, Sir Billy,” said the king. “I shall invite thee into my home as a royal guest, though be warned: should thou pay my daughter a visit in the night, not even thy status as Erdrick’s descendent shalt save thee from my wrath.”

Billy smiled and nodded. “You got it, Mr. King Sir.” With that, Billy waved goodnight to Gwaelin and was shown to his room. The bed was significantly softer than anything he was accustomed to, resulting in him falling asleep before he could even fully remove his armor.

Chapter 22

Billy awoke to the feeling of lips gingerly caressing his cheek. Standing above him was Princess Gwaelin, a smile draped across her face. She wore a white dress which both fully contained and held to the contours of her body.

“Good morning,” said Billy as worked out the stiffness of his joints from sleeping in his platemail.

“I wish thee luck in thy journey today. Would thou accompany me for breakfast?”

With a smile, Billy nodded and followed the princess to the castle’s dining room. He made a point to follow just far enough behind that he could be joyously hypnotized by her swaying hips and derrière.

Once seated in the dining hall, Billy watched the princess polish off a plate of eggs and ham before he could even finish chewing his first bite.

“My hunger hath been corrupted,” she said with embarrassment in her voice before stifling a princess-sized burp. She then motioned for the servants to bring her more breakfast.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with a hearty appetite!” Billy said as he tucked in to his meal. The food was delicious and refreshing.

After finishing his meal, Billy was brought to the king, who recorded Billy’s deeds in the Royal Scrolls of Honor. “Forever shall I be grateful for the gift of my daughter returned to her home,” said the King.

“No problemo,” Billy responded.

Gwaelin curtsied to Billy and then handed him a canteen of fresh water. “Even when we two are parted by great distances, I shall be with thee.”

Billy bowed to king, winked to the princess, and then went out to the balcony of the castle. He could see Charlock standing out in the countryside like a scar marring an otherwise beautiful face. Chanting the

spell of return, Billy took flight and made his way to the western desert in search of Erdrick's armor.

Soaring beyond unscalable mountains and dense forests, Billy did not see any badlands in sight. As he began to dip south, however, he saw the green of the hills grow sparser and sparser until hills became dunes and grass became sand. Then, there was the heat.

The sun bearing down on Billy's armor made him feel like a hotdog in a rotisserie. Billy landed in the coarse desert sands, hoping that the sun and heat would not be so intense were he closer to the ground.

"Holy moly," Billy moaned. "I wish that the old man showed me an ice cream spell or something."

He saw something metallic glinting in the distance. He retrieved Gwaelin's Love and watched its hand spin; when it stopped, it pointed directly at the distant glint.

Mounds of sand began to twitch as Billy hastened through the oppressive heat. Sensing danger, he drew his sword and prepared himself for battle. From the mounds burst scorpions longer than Billy was tall. They hissed and chattered and snapped their claws.

"Scorpions!" Billy called as he readied his sword. "I'm gonna rock you like a hurricane!"

The gargantuan arthropods lunged with their segmented tails, their stingers oozing venom. Billy dodged their blows and thrust his sword. Claws were slashed and bodies were pierced as the kung fu master whirled about, kicking up sand and delivering pain.

Wounded while their opponent was unscathed, the scorpions retreated back into their sand burrows. Just as Billy sheathed his blade, there came a rumbling from beneath him. Up from the sands emerged an even larger scorpion, with carapace shining like polished armor.

The monstrous arachnid scuttled toward Billy and lashed out with its tail. Billy swiftly caught it and wrenched his body so quickly that the creature flipped over and slammed hard onto its back. Billy leapt into the air and landed a kick to the scorpion's soft middle. The scorpion wheezed from the blow and dug itself back into the sands.

"Whatcha gonna do when Billy Lee runs wild on you?" the kung fu master shouted as he kicked sand in the general direction of the scorpion's nest.

After trundling through the heat for the entire morning, sand filling every crevice, Billy felt his last drop of water dissolve away onto his tongue. The midday sun was getting harsher and the glint did not seem to

be getting any closer. Just as though he felt like he would melt into human soup, Billy saw a figure moving in the distance. It was a man dressed all in gold.

“Hey!” he called out. The man’s features were obscured by distance and heat, but Billy could see that the man turned upon hearing his call. “Hey, dude!” Billy called again. The man definitely heard Billy, for he began to run. “Wait!” Billy shouted before he gave chase.

Despite the difficulty of running in the shifting sands, Billy could see that he was gaining ground on the fleeing man. As he closed the gap, he began to see the man clearer. Billy wasn’t chasing a man dressed in gold, but rather a man *made* of gold.

“Solid gold!” Billy cried out as he outstretched his arms to embrace the gold man. As soon as he was an arm’s length away, he tripped over a rock and landed face first. Spitting out sand, he croaked, “Wait up!” The gold man was nowhere to be seen.

Silently cursing his luck, Billy got to his feet and shambled toward the shimmer in the distance. Mouth parched and legs weary, not even his healing magic kept him from feeling wrung-out. After nearly getting on his hands and knees to climb up a large dune, Billy finally saw what was shimmering in the distance: an oasis.

With renewed vigor, the warrior sped toward the water. As he approached, he could see the demolished walls of Hauksness only a short walk away. After quenching his thirst and filling his canteen, Billy discovered that it wasn’t the water shimmering in the distance, but rather a lump of metal. Billy headed toward it. The metal, however, headed away from Billy.

“What the heck?” he said as he watched the lump bounce away from him. A few yards away, the lump turned and revealed that it had eyes and a red smile. It was an elusive metal slime!

Calmly, Billy approached the creature. Not wanting to spook it by drawing his sword, he quietly unhooked his axe and crept closer. The slime watched the martial artist with indifference as he bounded forward and brought his axe down hard. Billy’s follow-through was excellent, however his axe-head went in one direction as his haft went in another.

Gazing down at the splintered axe-handle, Billy said “Bogus.”

The metal slime’s eyes narrowed and it launched a small orb of flame from its mouth. Its impact did little other than make Billy angry.

“You shiny little butt-wipe!” he shouted as he drew his sword and slashed. The metal slime evaded so quickly that Billy could not catch

himself fast enough from letting his sword crash into the sand. The metal slime continued to outmaneuver Billy, and the warrior's stamina dropped.

"That's it!" Billy roared. "You're about to get faced for real!" He chanted his spell of hurting with such intensity that his tongue felt covered in Pop Rocks. He pulled his arms back and pushed them forward to hurl an enormous fireball at the metal slime. He watched as it honed in on the metal slime's position and, with an underwhelming *tink* sound, fizzled out into the sky.

Billy was speechless. With his options exhausted, he relied on the one thing he knew better than everything else: punching his problems in the face. With a tremendous bellow, Billy rushed the slime and launched it into the air with a jumping uppercut.

A catharsis like no other washed over Billy, and as a result he pumped his fist into the air and shouted in triumph. To the glimmering blob rapidly vanishing into the distance, the warrior cupped his hands around his mouth and cried, "Get bent, wastoid!" Feeling stronger than ever, Billy strode toward Hauksness.

Chapter 23

Only ruins remained where were once stood buildings, storefronts, and eateries. The servants of the Dragonlord had not only razed Hauksness to the ground, but befouled the land as well, turning water to poison and soil to silt. Nothing lived, nothing grew; it was desolation embodied.

Billy held out Gwaelin's Love and followed its guidance to a structure left somewhat intact. Its now-ruined columns and contaminated fountains told Billy that the building was once a temple. He climbed its crumbling steps, ducked under a fallen archway, and stepped into the half-collapsed temple.

In the light which shone in through cracks in the walls and gaps in the ceiling, Billy could see the armor standing in the center of the room. It was an untarnished cerulean in hue and trimmed in gold, with a shining breastplate and tassets. Between its wide pauldrons was fastened a cape as crimson as freshly-spilled blood. Its open-faced helm had two golden horns protruding upward, like a bison's. Centered on the helm and breastplate was Erdrick's symbol: the golden silhouette of a phoenix with wings outstretched and a round ruby in its core. Simply put, it was glorious to behold.

Billy gazed upon the suit and whistled in awe. It was then that glowing red eyes pierced the darkness of the helm and the armor sprang to life.

A ghostly voice resonated from within the armor. "Come closer," it said, "and thou shalt be cut in twain."

Billy came closer. "Is that you Erdy?" he asked. "I need your armor to beat up the Dragonlord."

"I am not Erdy," responded the armor. Its hands began to shimmer, brighter and brighter, until the shimmering solidified into a golden-glowing axe and shield. "I," said the armor, "am the Axe Knight."

Billy was unimpressed. “That’s a primo trick, but I’ve got one better!” Billy chanted the stopping spell. The Axe Knight’s weaponry flickered, but did not vanish.

A deep, reverberating laugh echoed out of the haunted armor. “Useless is magic against the Axe Knight.” The knight gave an overhead chop that clanged harmlessly against Billy’s shield. In turn, the kung fu wizard’s sword lunge glanced from the knight’s shield. As if taking part in a deadly ballet, the opponents circled and swung and dodged, twirling and flourishing and riposting.

The Axe Knight landed a blow into a nearby wall, and its weapon became lodged just long enough for Billy to strike its arm with a spin-kick. The force of the kick severed the magical connection of the vambrace from the rest of its armor, causing it to crumble harmlessly to the ground. The Axe Knight hurled its shield at Billy, knocking the warrior over. The knight twisted its axe from the wall and aimed a blow that would have decapitated Billy had he not rolled away in time.

Billy kicked the knight in the shin and sent its greave flying into the air. Hopping on one boot to keep its balance, the Axe Knight snarled with rage and began to madly swing its axe. Billy weaved away from every blow until he saw the chance to roll behind the knight. The martial artist launched into the air and, with a devastating midair sidekick, sent the knight’s helmet clattering to the ground. Headless and crippled, the Axe Knight was easily dismantled. With their wielder now vanquished, the golden axe and shield winked out of existence.

After shaking the pieces of armor to ensure them empty of any lingering aspect of the Axe Knight, Billy put them on. With each piece he wore, he felt invigorated. By the time he was fully suited up, he was as energized as though he just awoke from a refreshing nap after working out and eating a nutritious meal. He felt at that very moment like a juggernaut of justice ready to grind the Dragonlord to dust. Exploding with power, Billy burst through the dilapidated temple’s ceiling and soared into the heavens.

Flying faster than ever, Billy was a blue streak in the afternoon sky. In a moment’s time, Billy landed in the clearing outside of Breconary and strode into the town. The townsfolk called out words of encouragement as he passed. He was all smiles and thumbs-ups on his way to kneel before the king and his daughter.

The king smiled fondly at Billy. “Thou art truly the Dragon Warrior: the hero to save all of Alefgard!”

The princess, who had been snacking on a leg of lamb and stressing the seams of her gown, nodded in agreement. "Ready are thee to undo the evil wrought by the Dragonlord," she said exuberantly. "Go to the chasm, bring forth the Rainbow Bridge, and enter Castle Charlock! Thou canst do it!" Suddenly, the princess cast aside her meal, jiggled down the steps of her throne, threw her arms around Billy, and gave him a kiss so passionate that he could nearly feel steam rising up from his gorget. She gazed deeply into his blue eyes. "I love thee."

Billy looked at her with just as much intensity and said, "I know." He then grabbed her and kissed her until the king ordered his guards to have them separated.

"Before I go," said Billy as he straightened up and regained his composure, "I wanted to say that even though this is, like, a fantasy land full of smurfs and hobbits, this place has been more of a home to me than my own. There aren't any gangs or drugs or anything like that. Sure, you might get eaten by monsters when you're just trying to take out the trash, but at least you'll know that they're monsters when you see them. Where I come from, the monsters are hidden. You don't know if your neighbor will stab you and take your wallet while you're bringing in the groceries.

"The point is that you can't trust anybody there, but here you can. I just wanted to, like, thank you guys and junk. Once I beat up the Dragonlord and find my brother and go back home, I just wanted you all to know that I'll never forget you."

Billy bowed to the court and, in an azure flash, flew out from the balcony. Gwaelin trailed after, waving a white handkerchief in her hand. "Fare thee well, Sir Billy!" she cried out. "Fare thee well!"

Chapter 24

Standing on the precipice between Tantegel and Charlock was the old man. Gusts of wind battered his robe and beard, but he stood stock still as Billy landed in the dirt beside him. “Thou hast done well,” the old man said with a chuckle. “The Dragonlord shalt be waiting.”

Billy didn’t look at the old man as he unpacked the Stones of Sunlight and untied the Staff of Rain. When he held the artifacts aloft, they floated out of his hands and into the air. Light pulsed from them, brighter and brighter, until, with a blinding flash and a crack of thunder from the staff, they together summoned forth the Rainbow Bridge.

“Totally mondo,” whispered Billy as the magical rainbow unfolded from one end of the chasm to the other.

With their purpose fulfilled, the staff and stones fell from the air and were swiftly caught by the old man. “I shall hold onto these for safekeeping, Sir Billy.”

“You’ve done a lot to help me through this, old man, and I don’t even know your name. You showed me what it takes to be a real hero, not just some thug-punching lowlife. I’m grateful to you, wise dude.” Billy held out his hand, not for a high-five, but to shake the old man’s. The old man accepted Billy’s embrace.

“The tremendous power in thy possession was there from the start. I merely helped thee unlock its full potential. And now, thou art almost ready to face the Dragonlord.”

“Almost ready? What else is there left to do than to punch that jerk in the face?”

The old man’s crispity-crunchity laugh echoed down into the chasm. “Thou art still so brash. ‘Tis said that the Dragonlord hath claws that can cleave iron and fiery breath that can melt stone. The Shield of Erdrick is not made from either, and it shalt guard thee from his rage. So tough are the Dragonlord’s scales that only one weapon can pierce them: the Sword of Erdrick. The Dragonlord keeps them both in the depths of

his dungeon so that no one may use them against him. They are guarded by his fiercest servant, so thou must take caution.”

Billy took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m amped, old man. I couldn’t have done this without your help.” He clapped him on the shoulder, smiled, and then stepped upon the Rainbow Bridge. The old man watched Billy’s cape flap in the wind as the warrior crossed the bridge. Then, with a dry cackle, he vanished into the air.

With each step on the bridge, Billy felt excitement and anticipation. When he stepped onto the other side of the bridge, his skin prickled as he passed through the antimagic field. Though the rainbow bridge connected the lands of Alefgard and Charlock, they could not be more different. The grass in the Dragonlord’s domain was withered and grey and the trees were as black and snagged as rotten teeth.

Wispy fingers of fog entwined around the warrior, curling up around his shoulders and legs like overly-affectionate pets. The artificial gloam obscured the view of Charlock Castle. Billy knew that if he kept going straight he would reach the castle; even so, he suddenly felt turned around. Consulting Gwaelin’s Love for guidance proved fruitless, as its hand spun in never-ending circles. Minding each step, Billy continued forward until something made him stop.

Echoing through the fog sounded the unmistakable scrape of metal against bone. Where fear would have once consumed him, it now instead fortified his resolve. Though Billy did not turn around for fear of being lost in the mists, he knew that skeletons were approaching. What Billy did not know was that these were not ordinary skeletons, but the Dragonlord’s wraith knights.

Parents told their children of the wraith knights to frighten them into good behavior. They were the dead never once alive, the spirits of nether realms summoned by the darkest magic, unholy beings cursed to sate an unquenchable bloodthirst. With horned skulls to gouge, sharp incisors to tear, and hellish claws to rend, they were the bogeymen of Alefgard, and they were surrounding Billy.

Billy popped his neck, held his breath, and closed his eyes. He waited for the wraith knights to approach, to feel their breathless hisses in his ear and their butcher-knife claws on the back of his neck, before he broke them.

Lightning pierced the gloom surrounding Castle Charlock and Billy was the thunder and the roar. Thrusting his elbows through plate mail, fists through skulls, and knees through femurs, Billy doled out destruction to the never-dead wraiths as they hurled themselves at him.

Feeling their movements and predicting their blows, he dodged and struck and whirled and crushed. He vanquished them by the dozen and did not open his eyes until he heard the clambering din of their retreat. Just as the demonic spirits fled, so too did the mists dissipate. When Billy opened his eyes, he was standing before the iron portcullis of Castle Charlock.

As Billy opened the gate with a magic key and strode into the Dragonlord's lair, he entertained the idea of the wraith knights telling horror stories to one another about the man in blue who went bump in the night against the very things that they themselves went bump in the night.

Chapter 25

The interior of Charlock was drafty and silent. The only sound other than Billy's footsteps was the soft crackling of the fire smoldering in the wall sconces. In their dim light, Billy could see only an endlessly dark hallway and the gray slate of its walls.

He ventured forward, his sword and shield at the ready, following the hall as it curved left, right, and then left again. The lack of present danger made him all-the-more paranoid for hidden traps or shadowy lurkers.

When Billy arrived at the throne room, he was disappointed to find the ornate golden throne empty. Did he have the right castle?

Before the puzzlement could truly take grip on Billy, the throne room erupted in booming laughter that seemed to shake the very foundation of the castle.

A voice like a coal mine sounded in every direction at once. "Welcome, Billy," it said. "Thou hast come such a long way only to fail now."

"As if!" Billy shouted. "You're the one who's gonna fail, Dragonlord! Stop playing games like a punk and face me like a man!"

The laughter pounded in Billy's eardrums. "Face thee like a man? Fool! There is no man like me. Meet me in my sanctum, and I shall show thee firsthand. Until then, I do hope that thou art in the same mood for entertainment as I."

A hitherto unseen door slammed shut behind Billy, cutting off any means of escape. The wall to the left of the warrior began to rumble and shift. What Billy first thought to be a secret passage opening was actually the wall separating from itself and standing up. Where there was once foundation now stood an enormous man made of stone. From the gap left behind by the stone man's advent came forth the Dragonlord's servants.

The howling werewolf was the first to step forth. His pelt shimmered gold and his eyes seethed red. Behind him, the star wyvern launched itself into the air. A neon pink monstrosity with the face of a harlot and the beak of a buzzard, the creature batted its eyelashes and coiled its serpentine tail. In a flash of light came a wizard whose face was obscured under its white hooded robe. Holding aloft an auspicious staff, the wizard's eyes blazed white in the darkness of its hood. The final adversaries to be revealed were a crimson knight astride a blue dragon. Though the visor of the knight's crested helm was down, Billy could see eyes glowing red. In the knight's hands were a very familiar golden glowing axe and shield.

"We meet again," said the ghostly voice of the Axe Knight. "I shall like to take my armor back."

Billy pointed his sword at the knight and shouted, "Let's throw down!" It was then that bedlam broke loose in Castle Charlock.

Before the wizard could finish channeling the arcane, Billy silenced the sorcerer with his stop-spell and then kicked him in the teeth. Billy dodged out of the way of the stone man's ponderous punch and avoided the dragon's snapping jaws. After hurling his shield and striking the star wyvern off-kilter, Billy rolled into the werewolf's lunge and caught the beast by the hair. In a fluid motion, Billy parried the Axe Knight's swipe with one hand and used the other to bring the werewolf's muzzle down hard onto his knee. When the dragon exhaled flame, Billy intercepted it by sending out from his fingertips a stream of his own magical fire. The flames battering into one another sparked and popped. Driving himself to the limit, Billy pushed back the dragonfire into the monster's mouth and spiked it down its throat with his own fiery blast. With its eyes rolling in its head, the dragon hiccupped a plume of smoke before the collapsing to the floor.

Shaking off his daze, the werewolf slashed at Billy's back and howled in pain at chipping his claws against Erdrick's armor. Billy turned to roundhouse kick the werewolf but found his leg seized by the indomitable stone man's grip. As the stone man hurled Billy across the room, the wizard recovered his magic and struck the warrior out of the air with a bolt of lightning. Shocked, stunned, and feeling déjà vu, he landed hard onto the ground. Above him, the star wyvern began to croon softly in a tongue that Billy didn't understand. Though drowsiness overcame the warrior, he sprang into the air and punched the star wyvern in the beak. When he landed, he pounded the ground with his fist so hard that the tremor shook his foes off balance. Billy dashed to the wizard's prone form, kicked the consciousness from him, and snapped the wizard's staff in half over his knee.

As the werewolf got to his feet, Billy grabbed him by the tail and the scruff of his neck and rammed him face-first into the wall. Releasing the lycanthrope, Billy bounded out of the way of the stone man's stomping foot and swept the Axe Knight's legs out from under him. The star wyvern constricted its snake body around Billy and began pecking his helm. In turn, Billy hurled himself backward and landed with his full weight onto the wyvern. Its tail went limp as it fainted from the blow and Billy was back on his feet, sword in hand.

Flailing in a salvo of one-ton punches, the stone man telegraphed its predicable swings. Billy saw an opportunity to duck under the construct's legs and then donkey-kicked the living wall. With a tremendous crash, it landed on the floor.

Evading the incoming strike from the Axe Knight, Billy countered with his blade and literally disarmed the knight. Howling in frustration at its axe-arm being torn off at the elbow, the knight attempted to shield-bash Billy. Catching the disarmed axe in midair and sidestepping away from the possessed armor's shield strike, Billy brought the glowing weapon down with full force onto the prone stone man's head and split the rock in two. The stone man twitched and then stood up. Feeling around the stump where its head once was, the stone man shrugged its shoulders and slid back into its place to become a wall once more.

"Thou may have once defeated me," the Axe Knight growled, "but I am stronger than ever before. Have at thee!" From the gaping hole in the knight's armor came another shimmering axe. Hacking with its new axe-arm, the bodiless knight fended Billy back into a corner. The star wyvern's spell coupled with the exertion from parrying and weaving away from the Axe Knight's attacks left Billy feeling exhausted. Unwilling to give in to defeat, Billy hooked the knight's axe under his sword and pulled the ghostly armor toward him. As the knight was pulled forward, Billy struck out with his shield and pushed the knight's breastplate loose from the rest of its armor. With a sound like a kitchen's worth of pots and pans crashing to the ground at once, the Axe Knight's upper body collapsed to the floor. Its lower half kicked pathetically at Billy's shins until the martial artist lifted them up and wrenched them apart like a wishbone.

"Not again!" the Axe Knight wailed as his spirit returned to its own realm.

"You should really take a vacation," said Billy. "You're going to pieces!" Laughing at his joke, Billy leaned against the Dragonlord's throne to replenish his stamina. With a rumble, the throne tilted forward until it clicked. Billy was ready for the stone man to return as the wall before him began to tremble. Instead, a secret staircase was revealed. Unable to see

into the depths below, Billy produced his magical fire and descended into the Dragonlord's dungeon.

Chapter 26

The dungeon of the Dragonlord smelled of dampness and things long forgotten. Its dusty halls were thick with cobwebs that curled away into ash in Billy's fiery presence. The warrior moved with purpose throughout the halls and felt the presence of Erdrick's sword and shield nearby. Wearing the hero's armor was giving him a sense of direction as to where the weapons were, as if the pieces yearned to be together again.

Retracing his steps from dead-ends, descending seemingly endless staircases, and walking in circles around looping corridors, Billy happened upon a locked door. He unlocked it with the magic key and strode into the room. Even Billy's magic could not pierce the depths of shadow, but he could see that he was not alone.

From the darkness, a dragon greeted Billy. "Thou art here for the sword of the hero Erdrick."

"No doy, dude! How many other bros come in and out of here looking for stuff?"

The dragon snickered. "Thou would be surprised how many fools have made it as far as thee. A mere snack, each one of them. Make this easier on thyself and stand still so that I may roast you."

"Yeah, right! Why don't you just give me the treasure and save yourself the headache you'll wake up with after I've punched your lights out?"

The dragon snorted in derision, flames puffing out of its nostrils and revealing its full form. Larger than either of the other dragons Billy had encountered thus far, the red dragon took up the majority of the room. Billy also noticed that its tail was curled around a wide box with Erdrick's emblem emblazoned on its lid.

Rising up to its full height, the dragon breathed flames so hot that the stone floor turned orange from the heat. Skirting around the flames, yet choking on their fumes, Billy strafed to the dragon's flank and lunged

with his sword. Strong enough though his tempered broadsword was to pierce the scale of the green dragon, it bent in half against the red dragon's hide.

Throwing the useless sword down, Billy vaulted over the dragon's swinging tail and rolled under its swiping claws. The dragon's roar was loud and terrifying, but Billy was too supercharged with adrenaline to have room in his mind for fear. He tucked his body into a somersault and hand-sprung onto the dragon's spiny back. The beast roared and flailed, but Billy climbed its spikes like the rungs of a ladder. He straddled the dragon's shoulder and struck his fist hard upon the side of the monster's arm, causing it to drop Erdrick's box. Narrowly missing the snapping fangs, Billy rolled from the dragon.

When Billy opened the box, light shone out from within. Withdrawing Erdrick's sword and shield, he could practically hear a chorus of angels singing from on high.

With a hilt shaped like a phoenix with wings open wide, the blade gleamed even in the darkness of the dungeon. Embossed with the emblem of Erdrick, the shield was vaguely heart-shaped with its rounded top and triangular bottom. When he held the sword and shield in his hands, the emblems of Erdrick on Billy's helm, plate, and shield pulsed with light.

"Dragon!" Billy shouted as he swung the sword down. "Dragon!" he shouted again as he swung the sword to the side. He then raised the sword aloft and shouted a third and final time. "Dragon Warrior, ho!"

The dragon covered its eyes to shield them from the blinding light emanating from the Dragon Warrior. Billy leapt into the air and struck out with both his sword and shield. The dragon's right horn was slashed from its head and its snout was rumpled by the shield bash. Billy sliced and cut, prying away scales with each blow. The dragon roared in pain and fear as Billy subdued the mighty beast.

"I yield to thee," said the dragon, cringing. "Strike me not, for I shall reveal to you the path to the Dragonlord." The red dragon pushed against a section of the wall to reveal a passage. "Follow the path and thou shalt meet my master. Thou hast the strength to set us free from his tyranny."

Billy scrunched his face in confusion. "Free you? What are you talking about?"

The dragon seemed perplexed by the question. "Surely thou must know that all servants of the Dragonlord are bound to his will upon penalty of death?"

“I don’t think that’s common knowledge, dude.”

The dragon sighed. “I feared as much. I’ll have thee know that most dragons enjoy eating adventurers as much as thou surely would enjoy eating cockroaches.”

Billy stuck his tongue out in revulsion. “Blech!”

“Why dost thou think I wanted to char thee to a crisp? To rid thee of thy foul taste, of course.”

“I don’t know if the families of the dudes you ate will find that a suitable excuse, but I don’t have time to make you answer for their grief. I have to make the Dragonlord pay. Thanks for the help, butthead.” With that, Billy left the red dragon to nurse its wounds and mull over its life choices.

Rushing through the hall with the spell of returning, Billy entered and exited chambers lavishly decorated with hardwood furniture and paintings of dragons flying about the countryside. Billy at last came upon a wide-open grotto. Small bridges covered the gaps between stone walkways and soft sands. He could smell the saltiness of the ocean and hear the waves crashing against the stone walls of the cave. Curiously relaxing though the area was, Billy did not tarry near the ocean waves and instead continued forward.

On the other side of the grotto was a chamber locked by a magic door. Behind that door was a room even more lavish than the rooms he passed prior. There was a huge four-poster bed in the center of the room and a crackling fire in the hearth. Was this where the Dragonlord slept? Billy didn’t poke around in the Dragonlord’s drawers, but rather used his final magic key to unlock the door to the adjoining chamber. Curiously enough, he did not notice the Stones of Sunlight and Staff of Rain on the Dragonlord’s bedroom dresser or the silver harp resting next to the bed.

Bathed in the candlelight from dozens of crystal chandeliers, Billy stepped into the sanctum of the Dragonlord. When Billy pictured the Dragonlord, he imagined seeing one of several things: a wizard, a warrior, a demon, a guy in a three-piece suit, an actual dragon, anything but who he saw standing before him.

“I don’t believe it,” said Billy. “What are you doing here?”

The old man laughed his gargled pretzel laugh and stroked his beard. “Thou truly hath not figured it out yet?”

Billy scowled and did not answer.

“Thy stupidity overshadows thy bravery, Sir Billy. I hath groomed thee to be strong of both body and soul so that thou canst be my new

champion. Thy path was set from the start, with every trial and tribulation set by me. I give thee now a chance to share this world and rule half of it, if thou will now stand beside me. What sayest thou? Will the great Dragon Warrior stand with me?"

Billy set his jaw. "You dare ask me that, after all this? I'm just supposed to reject all of the torment that you've put everyone through, all the pain and death and misery, so we can just high-five like we're bros? Out of the question, you scumbag."

The Dragonlord tutted. "Thou art a fool, Sir Billy, and quite unlike thy brother." The old man smiled and continued, "For you see, dear Billy, he accepted my proposal."

"What?"

"Come forth, my champion."

From behind the gilded throne of the Dragonlord, clad in armor black as pitch, came Jimmy Lee.

"What's up, bro?" Jimmy said. "Miss me?"

Chapter 27

Billy could barely believe his eyes. Standing beside the old man was his own brother. Memories of their lives together flooded Billy with such intensity that he bit back tears. “How could you do this, Jimmy? After all that we’ve been through together and after all the bad stuff the Dragonlord did? How could you?”

Jimmy made a *pfift* sound. “You’re such a spaz, Billy. Always talking about doing the right thing and taking the high road. Dude, who do you think told the Black Warriors to kidnap Marian?” He pointed both thumbs at himself and answered, “Tu hermano.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because Marian likes me, Billy! She likes me--not you--me! But you wouldn’t keep your hands off of her. I wanted to show both of you that I could be the hero, that I could be the one to save her, and then she’d see. She’d see that I was the brother worth having.”

Billy saw that Jimmy’s eyes were clouded, muddled. “I can’t believe this! The old man has you under some sort of spell!”

Jimmy shook his head. “Not even, dingus! When I woke up in La-La Land after falling through the hole that Abobo was totally *not* supposed to throw me into, the Dragonlord showed me things I only dreamed of seeing. Cash, fame, girls...everything that I’ve always wanted. All I had to do was come with him to Castle Charlock. He showed me magic, just like he showed you magic. Yeah, that’s right, bro; I can throw fireballs too. But, whatever, man. You were supposed to join up with him and we were supposed to be a team again. Then you didn’t. Now, I’m going to have to put you down.”

Billy drew his sword. “Put yourself down, bro! He’s just using you! Look at him smiling over there! He’s made you his butt-puppet!”

“I’m nobody’s butt-puppet, dillweed!” Jimmy drew a black-bladed sword that seemed to soak in the light from the room. “It’s go time!”

The Dragonlord cackled as the brothers swung their swords with an intensity that only brothers could muster. Frothing with rage and shouting incomprehensively, they wanted one another dead.

“How easy it is for love to boil over into hate,” the old man said as he cast off his disguise and ascended his throne. With skin the color of a drowned corpse and onyx horns protruding from his head, he was a horrific figure to behold. Yet Billy and Jimmy gave the Dragonlord no notice as they savagely locked in mortal combat.

Swords clashed so hard that the sparks stung the brothers’ eyes. The two flew into the air and hurled flames at one another with no effect. They both cast the stop-spell at one another, resulting in them both crashing to the ground and dropping their weapons.

Billy rose first and lifted his brother up from the ground. With tremendous force, he head-butted Jimmy in the nose and felt his brother’s cartilage crack against his forehead. Jimmy shrieked in pain and tackled his brother, knocking loose his helmet and blackening both of his eyes. Billy felt his magic return to him and immolated his body. Unfazed by the heat, Jimmy gripped Billy by the flaming hair and began bashing his brother’s skull into the floor.

“This is for Marian!”

Billy spat out a tooth and shouted, “This is for Gwaelin!” before he boxed Jimmy’s ears. Dazed from the blow, Jimmy wobbled backward and allowed for Billy to gain leverage enough to deliver an uppercut. Falling backward off of his brother, Jimmy cracked his head on the ground.

“Up yours, Billy,” Jimmy barked as the brothers got to their feet. “The Dragonlord gave me power that you wish you had. The Black Warriors called me the Shadow Boss, but I’m the Shadow Boss for real now!”

Jimmy began chanting a spell that Billy had never before heard. The light in the chandeliers went out, and every shadow from the room folded into him. He screamed maniacally as darkness engulfed him and made him one with the lightlessness. Jimmy’s face melted away, and in its place was the blackened skull of the Shadow Boss.

Had Billy watched his own brother become the thing of his nightmares just a few days prior, all would have been lost. Now, with his phobia conquered, Billy’s resolve was unshakeable.

The Shadow Boss merged into the darkness. Billy radiated with fire and scrambled to find his sword. Like a nightlight in a child’s bedroom, the sword glowed softly, out of reach. Billy moved toward it.

Midnight-black fists lashed out and struck the warrior from every direction. He could hear the Dragonlord's hideous cackling.

Billy tried to fight back just long enough to get to his blade, but for each missed swing he received countless blows.

"I won't give up," said Billy as he stumbled toward his blade. When the Shadow Boss attempted to fling the sword away, the light from the sword burned his fingers and made him cry out in pain. Billy shoved the shadow that was once his brother, grabbed the sword, and then raised it high into the air.

Light strobed out of the weapon and revealed Jimmy's location. With a wide, arcing blow, Billy struck his brother down.

When the chandeliers relit, Billy could see that the shadows shrank away from the Shadow Boss. They pulled off his blackened armor and dissipated the sword of darkness, leaving only Jimmy Lee behind.

"Billy," he coughed. "Billy...what happened?"

Billy hoisted his brother up and looked him in the eyes. They were the clear blue that he had looked into his entire life. The spell was broken.

"It hasn't happened yet, but it's gonna." Billy whipped around to face the Dragonlord. "We're gonna show this ugly nerd why messing with the Lee brothers was the worst mistake he ever made. That's what's gonna happen!" Billy used his magic to heal both himself and his brother. Invigorated, they assumed battle stances.

Clad in only his vest, jeans, and kicks, Jimmy cracked his knuckles and cried, "Let's go to town on this pencil-neck!"

Donning his helmet and strapping on his shield, Billy then thrust his sword in the air and shouted, "Bungalacious!" It was a war cry, for the duo charged the Dragonlord.

Chapter 28

As the warriors rushed the throne, the Dragonlord raised his staff and called forth lightning from his hands. Billy protected his unarmored brother from the blast by absorbing the electricity with his sword. Jimmy hurdled past his brother and launched a flying jump kick. With an inhuman adroitness, the Dragonlord leapt from his throne and out of the way of Jimmy's attack. Whirling his dragon-headed staff behind his back and around to his front, the Dragonlord held out his free hand and motioned for the brothers to attack.

With reckless abandon, the brothers let loose a volley of violence. Billy thrust and hacked with his sword while Jimmy swung wild haymakers and roundhouse kicks. The Dragonlord flawlessly fended off each of the attacks, but the warriors could see that he was doing so with great strain. With perseverance, the warriors beat through the Dragonlord's defenses. Billy tore at the villain's robes with his sword and smashed limbs with his shield. Jimmy landed blow after blow until he was able to disarm the Dragonlord with a kick and knock him to the ground with an elbow smash.

Billy held the tip of the Sword of Erdrick up to the fallen Dragonlord's throat and said, "Game over, man."

Jimmy was the type to kick a man while he was down, and he did just that to the Dragonlord. "That's for messing with my brain, you phlegm-wad." Jimmy lashed out again. "And this is for making me fight my bro." When he tried to lash out a third time, Billy stopped him by draping his arm across his brother's chest.

"Game over for us too, Jimmy."

As Billy and Jimmy shared a glance, the Dragonlord laughed his tumbleweed laugh and thrust his hands at the brothers. They were sent flying across the throne room and landed hard against the wall.

"Dost thou think me so easily undone? The entirety of Alefgard is under my rule, and soon thy world will be as well! Think not that thy

entrance was purely accidental, for 'twas I who opened the door to thy realm. Draining this land of its resources was so that I may transcend this world and conquer worlds beyond. The Brothers Lee were to be my champions in the first new world, but that plan hath failed. The punishment for such failure, dear sirs, is death."

Drawing aside his cloak, the Dragonlord revealed his true self. Growing large enough to touch the ceiling and unfurling an unfathomable wingspan, the Dragonlord gnashed his fangs and flexed his claws. His face elongated into a horned snout while his ears lengthened and flattened into frills. His black horns burned red as they lengthened and sharpened. Blue skin gave way to purple scales while an enormous tail lashed behind him. Solidifying himself as the true Dragonlord, the great dragon spewed forth a hellish firestorm that swept over the brothers.

Both Billy and Jimmy ignited just in time to prevent themselves from being reduced to cinders, but the dragonfire still burned them greatly. Curing their wounds with magic, the brothers launched their counterattack.

Billy stabbed the Dragonlord's leg while Jimmy karate chopped the dragon's toenail. The two then bounded away when the Dragonlord's tail came crashing down onto the area they stood scant seconds prior. The Dragonlord blew fire that Billy deflected with the Shield of Erdrick while Jimmy kicked the dragon in the shin.

"This isn't working out so well," Jimmy called.

"Keep it up!" answered Billy. "I have a plan. Get in the air!"

The Dragonlord blew powerful gusts of wind with his huge wings, knocking Jimmy to the ground and Billy to his knees. The dragon then lunged forth to snap Jimmy up in his jaws. The karate master used the spell of returning to rocket into the air and bash the dragon in the teeth. Billy took advantage of the monster's daze by flying up and gashing the Dragonlord across his belly.

Unable to contain his wrath, the Dragonlord exhaled flames so hot that the stone floor of his chamber began to melt. Rising up higher into the air with their magic, the brothers watched as the Dragonlord began to sink into the molten rock. As the Dragonlord flapped his wings in an attempt to fly out of the magma, the gusts cooled stone and held the dragon fast in place.

In dragon-form, the Dragonlord's laugh was less like dry leaves and more like falling trees. "Thou art cunning, Billy Lee, to remember my boast of turning rock to liquid. Thou also forgot that my claws can cleave through iron!" With great sweeping motions, the Dragonlord began to

gouge out great hunks of rock. As he did so, Jimmy whistled to get the dragon's attention.

In Jimmy Lee's hand was the Orb of Light.

"No!" cried out the Dragonlord. "How did thou find that? I hid it with my undergarments!"

Jimmy scoffed. "For a King of Kings, you sure are a nimrod. I've been living at your joint for like a week. You don't think that I haven't looked through your stuff? Puh-lease!" Jimmy tossed the Orb of Light to Billy. "Do your thing, bro."

When Billy caught the orb, the emblems of Erdrick began to glow. Despite the frantic objections of the Dragonlord, Billy held the Orb of Light aloft and watched as purity itself poured out from it.

Light engulfed the room, and the Dragonlord's screams of protest became great roars of desperation which faded into barely audible echoes. The light dissipated, and only Billy and Jimmy were left in the chamber.

With their arms slung over one another's shoulders in congratulatory embrace, the brothers walked through the Dragonlord's chambers and into the grotto.

"Alefgard's safe now," said Jimmy as he and his brother gazed out into the sea. "There's no antimagic outside of this cave, so it's time to go home for real."

"Yeah," said Billy doubtfully. After a few moments, he asked, "Did you really have Marian kidnapped?"

Jimmy sighed. "Yeah."

"That's psychotic, man."

"Call it a cry for help, I guess."

Billy patted his brother on the back. "Look, bro. We all do stupid things for love. Just try not to do anything so stupid as to turn into a supervillain again. Let's go get Marian back and kick those Black Warriors in the gooch."

Jimmy nodded and the brothers flew off into the sky.

Chapter 29

Abobo felt good in his decision to throw both Billy and Jimmy into the hole. With the Shadow Boss out of the way, Abobo was free to take control of the Black Warriors for himself. What did Abobo care if Willy menaced everyone with his machine gun? With Abobo in charge, the Black Warriors would no longer need guns...only fists.

The man-giant lumbered forth to confront Willy about the gang's leadership. Just as he was about to open the door to the factory elevator, he heard a tremendous *wooshing* sound. When he turned, he saw that Billy and Jimmy had somehow returned. Not only that, but Billy looked like one of the Knights of the Round Table.

"Abobo!" shouted Jimmy. "You meathead! You know you weren't supposed to knock me into the pit."

Abobo scratched his bald head and shrugged. "I wanted to take over the Black Warriors for myself," the humungous man stated flatly. "You was in my way. Sorry, Jimmy, but them's the breaks."

Jimmy flew into the air and kicked Abobo with such force that the giant crashed through the factory door.

As Jimmy looked upon the unconscious Abobo, he harrumphed and said, "Apology not accepted."

The brothers walked through the decommissioned factory and took the elevator to the top floor. During the ride, Billy turned to Jimmy and stated, "If it wasn't for the fact that I'm still wearing Erdrick's armor, I'd swear that we hallucinated the past few days. It's like time didn't pass here at all. We did the Time Warp, dude!"

"Sh'yeah we did. That's some Narnia nonsense right there."

The elevator *dinged* at the top floor and the brothers stepped out into the Black Warriors' hideout. The walls were covered in chromatic graffiti tags and littered with empty bottles of beer.

"These guys always were slobs," said Jimmy. "Marian's just through this hallway."

Beyond the door at the end of the hall stood the Lee Brothers' martial arts rival: Chintai. The three learned martial arts together, but Chintai used his mastery for nefarious purposes. He also held a grudge against the brothers because they ceaselessly taunted him about his platinum pink hair.

"Hey, Chintai," laughed Jimmy. "I see that your hair matches your underpants today."

Billy chuckled. "Yeah, I heard that Cyndi Lauper needs a stunt double for her next music video."

Ignoring them, Chintai produced a pair of nunchuks from behind his back. Swinging them in graceful arcs, the rival martial artist approached. "I like my hair, you jerks!" He swung his weapon wide. Billy drew his sword and, in a blur, severed the nunchuks' chain.

Now holding a wooden stick, Chintai slumped his shoulders. "Man," he said, "I just got these for my birthday."

"Go home, Chintai," said Jimmy.

"And enroll back in community college," added Billy. "Your mom worries about you, dude."

"Shut up," the youth muttered as he muscled past the brothers. "Stop calling my mom."

"Catch you later," Jimmy said as he jiggled his hand in the shaka sign.

The brothers pushed through a set of double doors and found Machine Gun Willy staring through a window at the city below. Beat on the street was that Willy killed a hundred men in Vietnam and will not rest until he killed a hundred more on American soil. He said it was in order to "make things even." Clad in a purple leisure suit with the arms torn off, wearing steel boots, and leaning an M60 against his leather shoulder guard, the man looked completely insane.

Sitting on the couch next to Willy was his girlfriend, Linda. In her purple spandex with her short hair dyed red and a bullwhip curled in her lap, she was the perfect accessory to hang from Willy's arm. Linda didn't look up from filing her nails when the brothers entered.

"Heya, boys," Willy said from around the cigar in his mouth. "Come for the girl, eh?"

"What do you think, chump?" spat Jimmy.

When Willy turned around and saw Billy's armor, he laughed so heartily that he involuntarily spat out his cigar.

"Linda! Get a look at this bozo!"

The girl gave a disaffected chortle and then went back to filing her nails.

Willy hoisted his M60 and leveled it square at the brothers.

"I'm in charge of the Black Warriors now, Jimmy. Since we used to be pals, before I start shooting I'll give you turkeys until the count of ten to hightail it back to the garbage dump that you crawled out of."

The brothers looked at one another and then nodded.

"One," said Willy.

Billy unsheathed his blade and held out his shield.

"Two."

Jimmy got behind his brother.

"*Ten!*" The bursting fire of his machine gun did little to drown out the sound of Willy's laughter. Bullets ricocheted off of Billy's armor and shield, but Willy fired until his weapon clicked empty.

Willy screamed, "Why aren't you dead!?" with such intensity that he nearly busted a neck vein.

Jimmy leaned out from behind Billy and hurled fire at Willy's machine gun, melting its barrel. Willy looked down at it and screamed.

"Look at what you did to my gun! My precious, precious gun!" Throwing the ruined M60 to the floor, Willy grasped at his hair. "I don't want to live anymore!" he shouted before hurling his beefy form through the plate glass window overlooking the city.

Billy, Jimmy, and Linda gazed down to see that a pile of boxes had broken Willy's fall. Still conscious, the madman ran screaming from the factory grounds and into the streets.

Linda sighed. "I told him that he didn't take his medication today, but he didn't listen. It's going to take me hours to calm him down." The girl grabbed her purse and started toward the door.

"Hey, wait," said Jimmy. "Aren't you going to, like, I dunno, attack us with your whip or something?"

Linda rolled her eyes, muttered something about "all men being the same," and left the room. Billy and Jimmy looked at one another, shrugged, and then opened the door to the back room.

Chapter 30

“Stay away from me,” she screamed. “I’m not going to let you maniacs anywhere near me. You’ll have to gag me, because I will for real bite off your fingers!”

Jimmy and Billy raised their eyebrows and laughed.

“Listen to the mouth on her.”

“Jimmy? Is that you?”

“She’s got me quaking in my boots.”

“Billy? Oh, Billy! Cut me loose!”

Billy got behind Marian and used his sword to cut her bindings. She immediately stood up and removed her blindfold to see Jimmy standing before her.

“Hey, darling,” he said. Marian leapt into the karate master’s arms and kissed him deeply.

“Jimmy, I can’t believe it. You came to rescue me.”

Jimmy withdrew from Marian’s embrace and shook his head. “No, Marian. I have to be honest with you. I...I had you kidnapped.”

“What?”

Jimmy sighed. “I’m so stupid, Marian. I got jealous of you and Billy, and something inside me just snapped. Billy’s always been the nice one, and, well, I just didn’t want him to get nice with you. The thought of it drove me crazy...literally.”

“So you took charge of a homicidal street gang and manipulated them into kidnapping me for your own personal gain?”

Jimmy rubbed the back of his neck, and then nodded.

“That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“What!?” shouted Billy and Jimmy in unison.

“You did all of that just for me. You really must think I’m something special.”

Jimmy blushed. “Yeah, I really do.” He ran his hands through her blonde hair and passionately kissed her red lips. Billy began to creep out of the room when Jimmy called out to him. “Billy, where are you going?”

Marian stifled a laugh. “More importantly, Billy, what are you wearing?”

“Look, I can’t stay here with you guys. Marian, Jimmy loves you, and I’m sorry to say that I don’t. My heart belongs to another.”

Marian hugged Jimmy tightly. “You love me, Jimmy?”

Jimmy looked down into her blue eyes and said, “Yeah, babe. You’ve got a rockin’ bod.”

From his pack, Billy retrieved a handful of gold coins and dumped them on a nearby table. “Jimmy, get these fenced and use the dough to start a new life for you and Marian. Open up the dojo that you and I always dreamed about.”

“The Double Dragon Dojo? Billy, I can’t open that without you! Who’ll be the double in my dragon?”

“Duh! Marian will be your number two. I’m going back to Alefgard. Seeing this dingy city and breathing its grody air has opened my eyes. Sure, I missed you guys, but you’re safe now. And I miss my new home.”

Jimmy pulled Billy close and hugged his brother. “You’ve gotta follow your heart,” said Jimmy. “If you wanna live in La-La Land, I can’t stop you. Try not to do the Time Warp on your way down though, ‘cause I want you to see me after I’ve had some time to get my life back on track.”

Billy nodded. “I’d like to see that, bro.” To Marian, he said, “I’ll miss you, Marian. We had some good times together.”

She hugged Billy and kissed him on the cheek. “You look dumb in that outfit,” she said.

“Thanks, Marian. You’re helping to make my departure a much easier decision for me.”

Billy waved goodbye to his brother and his former girl and then headed down to the factory floor. Stepping over Abobo’s still-unconscious body, Billy made his way to the conveyor belt. He looked around the factory one last time before he plunged into the blackness.

When he awoke, he was lying in the familiar field. Standing over him was something else familiar: the green dragon.

As Billy reached for his sword, the dragon spoke. "Stay thy hand," it said. "I hath no quarrel with you, nor did I truly ever." Billy let the dragon continue. "I wish to be with Princess Gwaelin again."

Billy gave the dragon a quizzical look and asked why. "Because hers were the only lips which truly appreciated my baking," the dragon replied.

"But you ate people! You wanted to eat her!"

The dragon shrugged. "Things change," it said.

Billy sighed. "Okay, I believe you. Come on, I'll bring you to her." Together the two made their way to Tantegel.

As the guards wouldn't let the green dragon pass, for reasons that were very obvious, Billy entered alone. The townsfolk cheered at his arrival. As a real-life hero, Billy soaked up their adoration and doled out high-fives (once he showed them what they were).

After making his way slowly through the castle and into the throne room, Billy found that the king was alone.

"Your Honor, Sir."

King Lorik stood and bowed to Billy.

"Congratulations! Thou hast restored peace unto the world. But there are many roads yet to travel. May the Light shine upon thee, Dragon Warrior."

"Thanks, Kingy. Where's Gwaelin?"

"She hath been spending the majority of her time in the dining hall, complaining of a corrupted stomach. Thou must hasten to her."

Billy made his way to the dining room and found the princess leaning back in her chair, surrounded by empty plates.

"Billy," she moaned. "Billy, I feared that I should never lay eyes upon you again."

She hiccupped and rubbed her stomach.

"Gwaelin, are you alright?"

The princess burped softly into her hand. "The dragon hath tainted me with his cakes. Nothing I eat can ever satiate me, and I shall burst before ever feeling satisfied again."

Billy smiled and kissed her gently on the forehead. "I've got good news for you then, sweetie. There's someone who misses baking you cakes as much as you miss eating them."

Gwaelin's face lit up and she stood so suddenly that her belly sloshed and creaked. "Sir Billy, if thou speaketh truth, then I can eat in moderation again! Even so, I fear that I shall never again return to my wispy self!"

Billy cupped his hands around her ample backside. "Fat-bottomed girl, you make the rockin' world go 'round." Hoisting his princess up by her cheeks, he launched into the air and carried her out the window. They landed just in time to find the gatekeepers swapping recipes with the dragon.

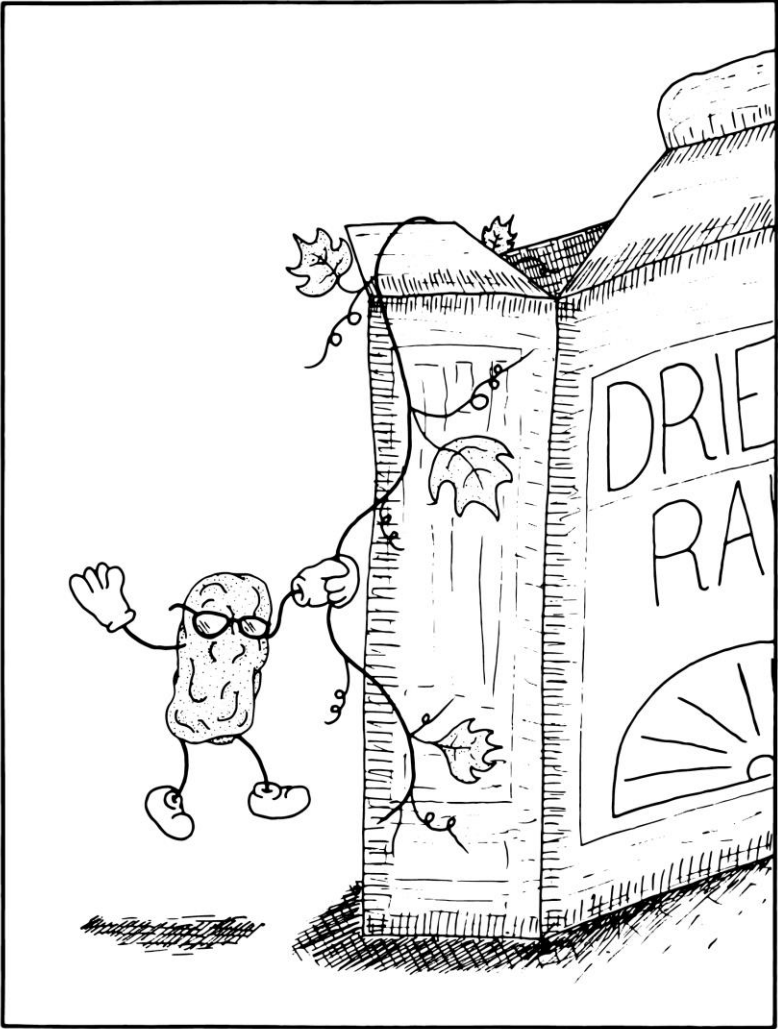
"Princess Gwaelin," the dragon said happily. "I am overjoyed to see you!"

Leaping onto the dragon's back, she cried out, "Get thee to an oven, dragon! I hunger for cake!"

Billy also hopped onto the dragon's back. "Well, the king said that there are many roads left to travel. Let's find one that leads to a dragon-friendly kitchen."

And so, Gwaelin, Billy, and the dragon set off to begin their new lives together. They lived happily ever after...that is, until the dragon ran out of cake batter.

But that's a story for another time.



THE CALIFORNIA RAISINS: THE GRAPE ESCAPE

by Samuel Clementine

Chapter 1

DMango Unchained

It was August. The warmth of the sun covered a beach deep in the heart of California, Stockton. There were beautiful women wearing nearly nothing, and handsome dudes wearing even less. In spite of the beautiful scenery, all eyes were fixated on one man lounging in his beach chair, beneath a purple spotted parasol. Usually everyone would be all dried out in the sweltering heat, but being dry was all this man knew.

“Can I be in one of your videos?!” squealed a curvy brunette on her knees in the sand.

“Will you adopt me?” begged a troubled young man looking to escape his parent’s cold hateful grasp on his miserable life.

“Why aren’t there any hit Nintendo games about you?” asked a bright handsome young man who spoke for the general populous.

How could a famous rock star like him relax when wherever he went there were always more adoring fans? No matter where he went it was beautiful women wanting to love him and handsome men wanting to be him. How could he escape who he was?

He took a sip of his Grape Goose, and it trickled down his enormous, fully engorged lips. They were thick and red and were the true centerpiece of his face. It was disgusting how massive his giant lips were, as they were able to inspire rebellion in any soul they whispered into. A single drop of liquor trailed down his gargantuan lips, down his wrinkled purple skin, and finally trickled onto the bottom of his hip new Adidas sneakers. Enough was enough, he decided.

Standing 3’4”, Raphael Raisin stood up and wiped the sweat from above his super hip and happening green shades. “Now I know you kids love the raisins, but ya gotta undahstand I’m takin’ some time off from all that, ya dig?”

Raphael took another light sip of his Grape Goose and tried to gain space from the adoring fans.

“The band and I are playin’ a big show tonight, and ya’ll are all invited if ya let me get a little R and R.”

The fans jumped for joy at the prospect of seeing *the* California Raisins live in concert. While most raisins were known for their criminal activities and dishonesty, the California Raisins were much safer and relatable raisins, so the fans knew they could trust Raphael. The crowd soon made themselves scarce to let their idol get the rest and relax as he needed.

Raphael felt nothing but the sweet rays of the sun on his shriveled purple body before he heard a familiar buzzing noise.

“Aw mercy. Not today,” he groaned, realizing that a call from HQ meant an end to his vacation.

Raphael saw his standard issue CALRAB Comprunicator buzzing with a bright purple light. He tapped the communication key with a gooey purple finger and brought the Comprunicator up to his disgustingly full and luscious lips.

“Y’all better have a good reason to call me today, or I’m gonna be one sour plum can you dig it?”

But Raphael was soon surprised by a sweet and soothing voice on the other end of the line. “Sorry Agent Purple, but we figured this mission was best left to you.”

“Baby, I’m sorry. If I knew it was you I wouldn’ta gotten so uppity.”

It was Dr. Melanie M. on the other end, the most beautiful and brilliant scientist at the CALRAB institute. “I understand, Agent Purple, but it’s important for you to get to headquarters right away. We need to explain the situation...face to face.”

Raphael could feel his juices flowing. They knew he couldn’t refuse Melanie’s request, and everybody at CALRAB knew he didn’t want to be bothered today, so what would they possibly need him for? They would only request their best operative if something was truly rotten. “I get th’ feelin I ain’t gonna be gettin back to the beach anytime soon after I hang up will I?”

“We’ll see you soon, Agent Purple.”

Raphael turned off his Comprunicator and grabbed his bottle of Grape Goose. Raphael chugged it down and firmly planted the bottle in the sand. “If I get back tonight, least I can know where I was havin’ a good time.”

Chapter 2

The Mandurian Candidate

CALRAB institute, the top secret research facility dedicated to squashing crime in the United States.

The futuristic technology housed in CALRAB was the stuff of legends, and the ultimate weapon against the bad apples who try to bring chaos to the world. Though fans would never suspect it, Raphael Raisin, the lead singer of the California Raisins, was actually a crime fighter in his spare time! Long thought to be nothing more than an urban legend by hardcore fans of the Raisins, CALRAB kept all of its operations under wraps to keep its operatives safe, and to protect the security of the free world.

Raphael had been doing work with CALRAB for several years while balancing his multimillion dollar California Raisins estate. Inside the technological utopia Raphael slowly shuffled his feet towards the dispatching station where he saw a familiar, voluptuous figure in front of him. Her skin the loveliest shade of lime green, this woman was able to make even a frumpy lab coat look absolutely beautiful.

"I hope you enjoyed your vacation, Agent Purple." Melanie's words seemed to have a tinge of regret to them.

"S'okay baby, I know ya gotta pick out the right guy for the job." Raphael was reluctant; he didn't think there was any job that only he could do. Surely Agent Yellow or Agent Orange could have taken care of this situation.

Melanie looked longingly at Raphael, up and down his three feet of purple masculinity. "You didn't even go swimming...and yet you're already so pruney." A grin surfaced on Raphael's face. She always knew just the right thing to say.

Melanie escorted Raphael down the hallway to the debriefing chamber. Raphael noticed other members of CALRAB recognizing him

and turning away. He saw Sarah Saskatoonberry whispering something to Harold Honeysuckle as he and Melanie walked by.

Raphael tapped Melanie on her shoulder and muttered, "Somethin ain't right here...you sure I was s'posed to come in today?"

Melanie lowered her head a bit and kept walking. Raphael knew something was off, but he had to keep his gargantuan lips closed until the two of them covered the mission. He felt a bead of sweat roll down his gigantic white gloves as Melanie led him into her quarters. It was a pristine white room with walls of nothing but bookshelves. The two sat quietly at her large gray table covered with various folders; each with the name of a well known criminal being targeted by CALRAB.

"I'm sorry we had to call you in today but...I would never forgive myself if I gave this mission to someone else."

"S'okay baby, ya'll need the best and that's why I..."

Melanie had tears in her eyes as she held onto Raphael's glove. "Please, Agent Purple, it's not because you're the best. This mission has to do with you...personally."

The color dropped from Raphael's face as he began turning lavender. "It's...it's my brothers, isn't it?"

Melanie bit her lip hard enough to draw blood as she turned away from him.

Raphael had been in the business long enough to know that nobody was safe, but he had convinced himself that he could at least keep his brothers out of harm's way.

Was it naiveté or did he think his skills were really that perfect that he could protect his brothers with nothing but his reputation?

"Ever since my daddy left, I told em...this ain't gonna happen." Raphael couldn't hide the tears flowing from underneath his shades. He couldn't maintain the cool demeanor of a raisin today. Melanie grabbed his glove as the smile faded from his absurd, crescent-shaped lips.

"You can do this. you're the only one who can save them," she whispered. Raphael wiped the tears from his dark violet eyes.

The city had been silent lately, and he managed to convince himself that the good guys had won. There were reports of kidnapping lately, but those happened all the time in California. Raphael clenched his fists and looked to Melanie

“Just tell me who, baby. Who did it? Who had the grapes to kidnap my brothers? It wasn’t the Cornleone Family was it? We put the Don on ice back in February!”

Melanie hesitated to respond.

“Then it’s gotta be the Bananno Brothers...or the Pomello Family out in Ohio. I know they were after me for...”

Melanie put a finger to Raphael’s frightening lips. “it’s...it’s C.I.T.R.U.S., Agent Purple.”

The room was silent as Raphael sought to find the words that could explain the pain that pounded through every wrinkled crevice of his body. “Fuck!” exclaimed Raphael. “Those goddamn pricks was so quiet for so long I thought they just....son of a *bitch!*”

Raphael slammed his gloves on the table. “Please, Agent Purple, not right now. We need you at your best! I can’t have you losing control. C.I.T.R.U.S. is on the move and we have reason to believe the head of the organization is involved in this operation. You and I both know C.I.T.R.U.S. has some of the darkest faces in the criminal world, you need to...”

Raphael couldn’t help himself clenching his fists and growling a raisiny growl. “I’ll fuckin’ kill em, every godtdamn one of em. I’ll kill em!” Raphael pounded on the wall ferociously.

“A violent raisin? I never thought I’d see the day,” remarked a gruff voice from the door. Hiding behind a white mustache were the piercing blue eyes of Chief Lance S. Lemon.

Chief Lemon lit a cigarette and stuck it between his yellow, wrinkled lips.

“I’d quit these damn things if it weren’t for people like you, y’know that raisin?”

Raphael turned to the Chief and sneered at him in disgust.

“Chief, please! Agent Purple has family on the line. You of all people should understand.”

Lance’s eyes fell on Melanie, but as he began to speak to her he turned towards the young raisin instead. “I’m just gonna tell you this once, kid. Here at CALRAB we do things by the books. If I hear you goin’ renegade on us...I’ll bring you in myself. Is that clear?”

Raphael, in spite of everything he had heard and felt today, looked the Chief in the eye and saluted. “Yessah. Understood.”

Chief Lemon looked back at Melanie and nodded. As he left the two alone, all that could be heard was the sound of the purple blood dripping from Raphael's gloves.

Chapter 3

Pruneskin

Raphael looked to the ceiling as he lay on a gurney, the blinding lights barely softened by his shades. Melanie prepared some of her trademark gadgets as Raphael tried to adjust his hospital gown.

“This new stuff ya got baby...I never know what to think. Y’sure it ain’t gonna hurt?”

Melanie flicked a needle while she grumbled underneath her surgical mask. “Please, Agent Purple, CALRAB technology is the one thing no criminal can withstand.”

The machines hummed in a smooth, rhythmic way. Raphael laid his cold body back and brought his bandaged bloody hands up behind his head.

Through the throbbing of his hands he could still hear Melanie’s instruments clicking together. As the fluorescent lights shined above him, Raphael could hear it, plain as day.

“YO YO PASS THE BALL BRUH!”

“C’MON I’M OPEN RAPH GIVE IT HERE!”

“TAKE IT TO THE HOOP BRO TAKE IT TO THE HOOP!”

The lights above him became as hot as the sun that shone over the brothers that day. He made a promise to all four of them; they’d be a family forever. He felt a warmth he hadn’t felt in a long time...especially so far away from the beach. And then...

“*Sweet Jesus!*” screamed Raphael, “*What you doin’ down there?*”

Melanie rose up from between Raphael’s legs holding a needle. “Please calm down! This is a delicate procedure.”

“Just sayin’, sweetie you gotta be real tender with me down there. My grapes baby, *my grapes!*”

Melanie grimaced as purple liquid dribbled down her hand. “Stay still. It’ll be over soon.”

Raphael was no stranger to having women between his legs, and having things injected into him wasn’t particularly uncommon either, but whatever Melanie was doing here was definitely out of the ordinary.

“What the hell you doin down there, girl? You can’t leave a raisin in the dark when you’re handlin’ his grapes, y’know?”

Melanie jabbed one last time as Raphael’s face turned sour.

Dusting off her hands, she rose to her feet and held Raphael’s glove. “Trust me when I say what you’ve got down there will be just what we need to stop C.I.T.R.U.S.”

Raphael looked down at his groin to see a tube connected to him leading towards a small green and purple pistol lying on the table beside the gurney.

Melanie let go of Raphael and paced over to the garbage can. “With a bit of tweaking I’ve been able to genetically create a lethal weapon out of the juices flowing inside of you.”

Melanie snapped off her gloves.

“Now you’ve got a gun more potent than anything your enemies will be able to withstand. Just know that when you fire, you will likely feel an...enigmatic sensation.”

She dropped her gooey gloves into the garbage as she looked back at Raphael, her smile showing even beneath her surgical mask.

“Maybe we can have this meeting a little more formally when you make it back.”

“Yea, just as long as I ain’t gettin’ somethin’ hooked into my grapes again, I can dig it.”

Raphael gently lifted himself from the table and wobbled to his feet. He staggered around a bit as he grabbed the gun, held it against his hip, and began waddling to the exit of the medical bay.

Melanie turned to the pruned wonder and said, gently, “I didn’t know you’d be wrinkly even down there...”

Raphael chuckled as he twirled the Glockamole around his fingers. “Each a’ them wrinkles got a story behind it. Keep your ears open, baby.” Melanie smirked as Raphael waddled into the hallway.

“I gotta say, raisin, it looks like someone made you sit on the business end of a pineapple.”

Raphael saw the Chief's smug grin through the cloud of cigarette smoke. In spite of his wooziness Raphael managed to stand strong as he tried to walk past the barrel-chested Chief, but he was halted by Lance's odorous grip.

"Don't forget, you got four zones to scout out, and I'll be watching you every step of the way. You pull anything fancy, kid, and you'll find yourself locked up in Guavanamo."

Raphael pried himself out of the Chief's icy grasp and continued to the teleportation bay. As he waddled he could hear Chief Lance chuckling to himself yet again. This mission wasn't just to save them, it was to prove that old bastard wrong.

Raphael found himself in front of four tubes, all glowing green and black. Above each was the name of a quadrant in neon lights. Maize Maze, Factory, Grapevine, Juicery.

Raphael knew that the fate of his siblings, and that of the tri-city area, was in his capable hands. He gripped the Glockamole, while grimacing, and entered the tube marked Juicery.

As Raphael closed his eyes and put his hand on the tube's charge port, his body started to disappear in specks of purple energy. Just before he vanished completely he saw Melanie standing before him, smiling.

He nodded to her as the transmogrification was complete, and he found himself standing inside of that devil's den known as the Juicery!

Chapter 4

The Blood of Juices

“Quit runnin’ kid! You ain’t gettin’ away!”

The voice echoed throughout the damp hallway. The worn brick hallways were coated in faded stains of various colors; purple, red, and green, and the floor was covered in similarly colored puddles that reflected the dim lights swinging on the ceiling.

A blue sneaker splashed into a purple puddle and stopped in front of a large, dirty, brick wall. The owner of the sneaker, a young pear, turned to face the muzzle of a gun shining in the darkness in front of her.

“Yo! Ya best put those hands in the air.”

The trembling pear, clad in a red hoodie with Che Guavara emblazoned on it, neglected the order and instead began slamming herself into the wall repeatedly.

The gun clattered to the floor as a young raisin dashed towards the pear and peeled her away from the wall, stained with green blood.

“Ya damn fool! I ’unno what you’re doin’!”

The pear looked up at her captor only to see a young be-shaded raisin with a stylish afro.

“I ain’t got a clue who raised ya...but those pearents a’ yours should be ashamed!”

The pear’s face was being pushed to the ground as muffled sobs could be heard.

“Ain’t nobody but nobody gonna come back from the dead, y’dig? You can do whateva you want, kid, but killin’ yo’self ain’t gonna do *jack!*”

As the raisin let go of her, the pear’s Juice-stained hands tried to clear away her flowing tears. “I just wanted to make some extra money selling Juice. I didn’t think it was like this.”

The Juicery was nothing but a rundown old building to anyone who asked, but when night came it turned on the machinery to create the newest, hottest Juice on the streets. It was a common story, young men and women wanting to make money got into the Juice business thinking that it wouldn't be so dangerous. The truth of the matter was far more sinister: Juice dealers gave their young employees a taste of the goods, and then hooked them into an endless loop of selling Juice to new customers to make the money to buy Juice for themselves.

"Listen kid, we got ya whole life on file. You ain't a fruit basket, you just been hangin' with some bad apples. You come to town wit' me and I got a joint they call CALRAB, they might got a place for you."

Blood flowing from her wounds, the sobbing pear looked up at her savior with remorse. "I just...I needed money."

"I know, baby...we all do."

The raisin held a hand out to the pear, and he smiled.

"They call me Raphael. I sing with my brothas to make some extra scratch. Been hopin' we cut a deal soon."

The pear wiped away her tears and shook Raphael's hand. "I'm Paula. I'm sorry for all of this." Raphael embraced Paula under the dim lights as she stifled her last sobs.

The Juicery looked as dark as it did those seven years ago. The walls just as stained, the bricks just as corroded, and the swinging dim lights still flickering.

Raphael saw the enormous teal pipes on the horizon. The only way to make it to the top of the Juicery would be to climb the pipes like some kind of acrobat. Thankfully raisins were known for their athletic prowess, and such a task would be simple for a man like Raphael.

He walked carefully as he listened for any criminals hiding out in the Juicery, but it seemed like there wasn't a sign of life to be found anywhere. The Juice dripped from the ceiling while fluorescent lights hummed, but not a single person looked to be around.

Raphael felt a chill go up his spine as a stiff wind brushed against his back. He scrambled to unsheathe his Communicator. "Baby, come in, this place is a damn ghost town," Raphael whispered.

Melanie's voice came through the static. "Agent Purple, we're only detecting the bio signal of a single life form inside of the Juicery. We've confirmed it to be one of your brothers, but I don't know why they would leave him alone like that."

“They neva’ would.”

Raphael placed his Communicator back onto his hip as he began climbing the teal Juice pipes.

Raphael felt sweat dribble down his wrinkles as he swung his arms from side to side grabbing pipe after pipe. He could hear nothing but steam releasing from the pipes, and saw nothing but more pipes. Raphael looked down and gasped as he saw boiling purple Juice underneath him. If he lost his grip, he’d be dead meat.

“Damn...no wonder nobody’s alive round here.”

Raphael couldn’t help but look down a bit more. It almost looked like they were boiling bones in the Juice vat, but he had to keep moving. Moving along like a purple blur, Raphael swung from the pipes toward the horizon.

He kept his eyes pointed forward until he couldn’t help but slow down. Panting through his gargantuan lips, Raphael had to grip the next pipe and wrap his legs around it to stop himself. He was out of breath, but it finally looked like there was an end in sight. Though it looked like it was a mile ahead, he could make out the faint image of a massive barrel atop a brick fixture.

The heroic raisin caught his breath, but he began to hear a strange gurgling noise. Raphael looked around, and noticed up above that the pipe he was gripping was leaking boiling hot Juice.

“*Lord a mery!*” Raphael screamed as he began swinging faster than ever before.

Raphael was no longer looking; he knew where he had to be and if he didn’t make it he would die a boiled raisin. He could feel the heat above him as he kept swinging. His glove was finally on the last pipe, with Juice mere inches above his head.

With an ear shattering scream he dove onto the bricks below him. Raphael ducked down as he waved his hands around, sore from all the swinging. “I ain’t no damn chimpanzee! The hell is all this?”

Raphael looked around and saw the barrel from earlier, situated atop a large brick fixture, suspended in the air about seven feet above him. Raphael gasped for more air as he noticed a small wooden door with a glass window in front of him.

He struggled to his knees as he saw some slight movement behind the window. Raphael dusted himself off and began to reach for the door handle.

“STOP RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE, RAISIN SCUM!” a robotic voice bellowed. Raphael rubbed his shades and looked around, but there wasn’t a soul to be found.

The voice couldn’t have come from the door; it almost sounded like it came from above. Raphael, perplexed, glanced above him and saw that the rotund barrel had sprouted a disgusting nose made of a faucet, two stubby brown legs and arms, massive bloodshot eyes, and a crooked grin made out of barrel planks.

“Gotta tell ya, brutha, you don’t look like no fruit I ever saw. Ya just lookin’ like one big ugly sumbitch up there.”

The barrel creature began to tilt from side to side, and it grimaced with its hideous teeth. “CLANK BUZZ WHIRRRRR. I AM KEGDROID 9.0. INTRUDERS MUST BE ELIMINATED!”

Raphael drew his Glockamole and looked towards the ferocious android. “Sorry, kid, I ain’t got time to mess with no punk. I got a brother to save.”

Raphael dashed towards the brick wall to hoist himself up and onto the platform where Kegdroid sat. Just as Raphael’s sneaker left the ground a pile of purple goo splattered onto his face. He looked up to see Kegdroid’s faucet nose dripping with the mysterious purple substance as the vile robot sneered at him.

“MY TOXIC JUICE WILL MELT ALL ORGANIC LIFEFORMS BEEP BOOP!”

Raphael looked to his shades and saw steam rising from them as the toxins slowly ate away at the plastic.

Raphael hesitated, but he reluctantly threw his shades at the floor as they finished melting away. His brow furrowed and he raised his Glockamole.

“Y’all just made this personal!”

Raphael couldn’t attack Kegdroid from the walls, but he had one chance to take out this devious machine! Kegdroid’s horrible toxic mucus sprayed down on Raphael who courageously began to slide his foot backwards, as though he were walking in reverse. No creature on Earth could stop a California Raisin from Prunewalking, even in the face of danger!

“WHIRRRRR CLANK CLANK CLANK! DOES NOT COMPUTE! IRRATIONAL MOVEMENTS FROM ORGANIC LIFEFORM!!”

The Kegdroid's nose stopped spewing toxic Juice as Raphael held his Glockamole straight up into the air, aiming at the platform itself.

Raphael squeezed the trigger, and his face twisted in confused and erotic bliss. A shining orb of purple goo flew straight into the air as if it was guided by the Heavens themselves. The bullet of jelly slammed into the decaying bricks, which all began to collapse in on each other.

“BZZT KSSSH! ERROR ERROR!”

The mighty Kegdroid tried to balance itself, but it was too late. Raphael dove out of the way as the entire platform collapsed, bringing the Kegdroid down with it.

Raphael shielded his eyes as a massive crash shook the Juicery. The once mighty Kegdroid was broken into a thousand pieces amongst the bricks.

“Well sheit. I bet my shades was more expensive than you, ya ugly motha.”

Raphael turned away from the wreckage and opened the door in front of him. Inside a damp dimly lit room was the young drummer, Reginald Raisin, tied to a chair with a strand of duct tape over his purple lips. Though his eyes were hidden by a pair of kickin' rad shades, it was evident that Reginald lost all fear upon seeing his brother. Raphael sighed with relief as he grabbed Reginald and began to untie him.

“S'okay bruh, we gonna get ya home in two shakes.” Raphael ripped the tape off of his little brother's mouth, and Reginald let out a yelp.

“*Man*, Big Bruh. You tryin' to finish what them C.I.T.R.U.S. bastards started?”

Raphael let out a hearty laugh as he held his brother close.

Chapter 5

Guess Who's Plumming to Dinner

In the transportation chamber, Melanie sat in wait while Chief Lemon stood idly by, taking a drag off of his cigarette. Melanie refused to make eye contact with the cold chief as she kept her hand on her Communicator.

"You knew he was gonna find out if we let him on this mission. You really think some punk raisin is gonna understand what he sees in there?"

Melanie shivered and stood up from her table. "We didn't have a choice. Agent Purple had to do this, and if this is how he finds out then we'll...we'll talk about it."

Chief Lemon took his cigarette out and pointed it at Melanie fiercely. "You saw what that crazy raisin trash did in there when you told him about his brothers. You really think he's gonna react any better when he figures it out? He's a loose cannon and if we don't put him away now this whole organization could come down."

"Agent Purple is one of our best, and he'll understand! You just need to trust someone for once in your life sir!"

The Chief's face turned sour. "Raisins? You want me to trust raisins with the fate of this country? They're nothing but violent thugs. I don't care what you see in him, he's trash. You see what he does when he finds out, then you'll see the true face of a raisin."

Chief Lemon took a final drag off of his cigarette and dropped it to the floor. He stamped it out. Melanie shot him a cold gaze as he left the room. Then she sat down and looked towards the Juicery tube.

About 20 minutes later, the lights began to flicker as Melanie leapt to her feet and smiled. Raphael teleported into the chamber with Reginald's weakened body resting on his shoulder. "Agent Purple, you're alright! I knew you could do it!"

Raphael placed Reginald's weak body onto the sofa and turned to Melanie.

"Some ugly barrel knocked off my shades. F' that's the worst they got, betta get six more helpers, can you dig it?"

Raphael down next to his brother and put an arm around him. Reginald looked up at his brother weakly then laid back down on the pillow underneath him.

Melanie had never seen Raphael's eyes before; beautiful beady black eyes that could charm any woman stared back at her as she looked at the raisin brothers. Though the silence was something she'd yearned for, Melanie had to break it.

"Agent Purple, are you ready to enter a new area? I know you're ready to get back to relaxing after the mission is over..."

Raphael looked towards the tubes. "Could go to the Factory, might be able to figga some stuff ov..."

"Actually, Agent Purple!" Melanie abruptly cut him off. "You would be best off going to the Maize Maze next! You know the ins and outs there, you'll be back in no time! You'd want to make sure you saved as many of your brothers as possible in case something happened. Right?"

Raphael looked to Melanie, perplexed. "Y'all good baby? Ya talkin' all fast like today."

Melanie glanced towards the ailing Reginald and back towards his older brother. "I'm just worried about them, that's all. A lot of people out there love you boys, you know." Raphael shrugged and began to waddle towards the Maize Maze tube when a weak voice cried out.

"Ey! Raph...c'mere, bruh. I got somethin' for yuh."

Raphael saw a limp hand raise from the couch. As Raphael stepped back to his brother's weak body he saw Reginald's shades clasped in his hand.

"Yo...can't go out lookin like that, Raph. Gonna...gonna look like a...a real bitch."

Raphael smiled tenderly to Reginald, and gently took the shades from his brother's hand. As Reginald tried to lay his arm back down Raphael grabbed it.

There were small marks on Reginald's arms looking like rather large needle pricks. Raphael put his new pair of shades on and looked disgusted at his brother.

“Reginald, you ain’t back to the old tricks again are ya?”

Reginald appeared confused as he looked weakly at Raphael. “Nah bruh. I woke up like this. Some sour grapes knocked me out, then when I woke up I was feelin’ all bitch made.”

Raphael promptly turned to Melanie and gestured to his brother. “Baby, I need ya scannin’ him up and down, seein’ what’s goin’ on, aight?”

Melanie gently took Reginald’s hand and smiled. “I’ll find out what’s wrong with him. You just take care of the rest of your brothers.”

Raphael clenched his gooey fist and nodded. As Melanie began to lift Reginald up, Raphael walked into the Maize Maze tube and found himself teleported to the mysterious maze made of maize.

He felt the sun beating down. Countless stalks of corn towered above him. Devious scarecrows from halfway through the field gazed upon our wrinkled hero with fiendish grins. Horrifying giant birds flew overhead, looking mighty hungry and ready to devour a raisin in a single gulp. Raphael truly had his work cut out for him this time!

Chapter 6

Corn in Flames

Raphael stared at the ferocious cornfield, and then headed towards a small passageway in the opposite direction. After walking for about six seconds Raphael found himself inside the ruins of an ancient civilization with stone pillars scattered around.

“Maze my purple ass,” Raphael muttered as he wandered into the darkened citadel before him. The courageous raisin walked along a pathway made up of dull gray cobblestones, though where it could lead is anyone’s guess. As his sneakers padded upon the stones, he noticed that the dying green plant life seemed to be shaking more the further he went. “Ain’t no breeze...must be a rabbit.”

Raphael continued forward, and a silent chatter began to pipe up from the thick brush. He slowed his pace as he drew his gun from the holster.

The hard-boiled raisin took each step as though it could be his last. He shifted his gaze from side to side, Glockamole at the ready. Raphael’s footsteps no longer made noise as he gently tiptoed along the path. “Might be some damn jaguars round here,” Raphael whispered as a cobblestone that sunk into the Earth beneath his step.

Raphael looked down to his feet and heard a horn sound off in the distance.

“Ain’t no jaguars...no pumas neither.”

Raphael wiped the sweat from the creases in his forehead as he looked towards the bushes, which were no longer shaking. Off in the distance a massive stone monument was barely visible, obscured by mist. He walked through the mist with his finger on the trigger, looking towards the monument with determination.

“I know a C.I.T.R.U.S. base when I seen one. They ain’t foolin’ me.”

Raphael had been in the game long enough. There was no hiding the truth from his beady black eyes.

The closer Raphael came to the stone monument, the shape became clearer and clearer. It was in the shape of a large Aztec head wearing a feathery headdress and shimmering golden earrings. A large nose was jutting out from between two closed stone eyes, where one might find the nose on a normal head.

Raphael eyed the head carefully as he looked around the perimeter and saw no other paths around the column. He raised an eyebrow to the bizarre stone fixture and placed his hand and ear to the side of the monument. Raphael lightly knocked on the shrine right beneath its ear.

“Hollow as hell. Shoulda known.”

Raphael pulled himself off the stone slab and aimed his Glockamole at the column’s forehead.

“Ugly old jive turkey, how ’bout I put one right between ya eyes?”

Raphael put his finger upon the trigger as a faint rumbling shook both the ground and the raisin standing atop it. As Raphael tried to keep his balance he saw the monument radiating an otherworldly yellow glow. Its stone eyes slid open, and the shaking stopped.

“DESECRATING THE LAND OF MY PEOPLE WILL NOT BE ALLOWED!” the stone monument bellowed.

Raphael fumbled with his gun while trying to get a good aim on the massive stone head.

“ONLY THOSE WITH THE WISDOM TO PASS WILL BE PERMITTED! ALL OTHERS WILL BE CURSED BY THE STRENGTH OF MY PEOPLE!”

Raphael shivered as he looked towards the stone head and brought his gun down. “Wisdom? Lay it on me sucka.”

“ANSWER ME THESE RIDDLES THREE! THESE RIDDLES PASSED ON FROM GENERATIONS OF MY PEOPLE WILL DICTATE WHO IS WORTHY TO ENTER MY...”

Before the idol could finish a purple bullet launched forward and shattered his enormous stone nose. The idol’s eyes closed again and his massive jaw unhinged and opened up, revealing a passage.

“Man, I ain’t know no damn riddles.”

Raphael walked forward and casually hopped through the idol's mouth. He landed in a small brown room surrounded by nothing but walls.

"Well don't that beat all? Ain't no path down here!" Raphael, feeling claustrophobic, searched the walls around him for an exit when suddenly the floor began to shake.

As he tried to climb out of the hole he was in, the floor underneath him started to collapse.

"Baby, I can't hold on!"

The shaking walls knocked Raphael onto the shattered floor and into a deep, dark abyss below. All that could be heard around the Maize Maze were Raphael's screams echoing down into the pit.

* * *

"How many damn times I told you not to leave the water runnin' when you're brushin' your teeth, Ricky?" Raphael exclaimed into the bathroom of a dreary decrepit apartment.

"Maybe if you weren't such a tight ass all the time it wouldn't make a difference!" exclaimed the second eldest of the California Raisins, Ricky "Rick" Raisin. "Man, you're actin' like you run this damn place. I'm a big boy, Raph, and I'm gonna do what I gotta do before auditions."

Raphael sighed and rolled his eyes behind his shades. It was a look Rick had seen more times than he could count, and he'd had enough.

"Raph, get off my case, man! I just wanna make...I wanna make it work for all of us!"

Ricky balled up a fist and swung at his brother. Raphael caught the punch in his hand and forced Ricky to the ground.

"Ricky...I been workin' hard to keep all this shit round here together. I know it ain't easy, but we been makin' ends meet real close round here, ya dig? If we blow this audition then I ain't gonna let us get kicked out over a damn glass of water!"

Ricky turned away from his brother, looking at the instruments leaning against the radiator. "It was a lot easier when daddy was around," he said. "We shouldn't have it so tough, bruh. We're good guys. We stay outta trouble and everything."

Raphael nodded. "Long as we raisins, they gonna see what they wanna see. Until then we gonna work hard, we gonna work tough, and we gonna hope that's enough to make it by."

Raphael let go of Ricky, whose arms sank to the floor. "Sorry 'bout the water man. Daddy used to say..."

"I know what he said...but now it's just us. I'm gonna keep us five goin' no matter what, but I need your help too. Can ya dig it Ricky?"

Ricky nodded sternly and shook his brother's hand. "You bet I can dig it, Raph."

The brothers hugged each other tightly, until Ricky abruptly broke off the hug and walked back to the bathroom. The faucet was still running a bit and he turned it off.

"We a team, right Raph?"

Raphael's smile reached the tips of his shades as the pouring faucet was reduced to nothing more than a few drops of water hitting the sink.

* * *

Drops of water echoed in the darkness, a few of them falling upon Raphael's face as he slowly opened his eyes.

As he tried to wipe the water from his face, he felt his hands tied together at his waist. They had been crudely bound together with vines acting as ropes. Further down he could also see that his holster was empty and the Glockamole was nowhere in sight.

Raphael was in a dark cave. The only thing he could make out other than some yellow rocks was a bit of light shining in from the ceiling he had fallen through earlier. He struggled to get to his feet, but as soon as he was able to stand he was met with a blowgun in his face.

He backed up and tried to scan who was hiding in the darkness, but when he did a series of torches illuminated half a dozen strange looking green apples in red tribal garb. The apples were grouped around Raphael in a circle pattern, all pointing blowguns at him.

Each of them wore red and yellow face paint underneath their eyes. Raphael heard the sounds of footsteps behind him, but before Raphael could say a word, a deep Italian voice made itself heard.

"The Applerigine Tribe...their strategies in the wilderness are unsurpassable wouldn't you say? Toss 'em a little green and they'll do whateva' ya need."

Raphael turned to see who was there, and recoiled in horror.

"No way baby, this ain't...this ain't happenin'!"

The man walked forward dressed in a large green husk tuxedo and dark leather shoes.

“You ain’t C.I.T.R.U.S.! What the hell are you doin’ here, Don Cornleone?!”

The corn don stood arrogantly behind the flickering torches as he smiled proudly. “Well, my little raisin, that’s very simple. You thought you put me in the freezer, but everyone knows...corn is best served warm.”

Don Cornleone shoved his way past the Applerigine tribesmen and looked down at Raphael.

“C.I.T.R.U.S. has some friends in awfully high places. They didn’t want me getting eaten up in prison, so they decided to let me join their prestigious little ensemble.”

Raphael looked up at the Don and sneered. “So y’couldn’t play with the big boys and decided to be somebody’s lackey? No wonder I creamed ya so easy.”

Don Cornleone violently shoved one of the Applerigines to the ground as the rest looked at him in terror. “Untie him you goddamn cretins. I wanna take this raisin’s grapes personally.”

The Applerigines reluctantly untied Raphael and then carried their wounded comrade away from the Don.

“Sorry, raisin, but I’m gonna plant you six feet under with my Korn-Fu.”

Don Cornleone shed his husk tux and revealed a white karate uniform. The Don struck a karate pose as he punched Raphael square in the gut.

Raphael was sent flying back, but he caught himself on the heels of his sneakers. He wiped blood from his lip as he smirked and said, “Damn. I forgot how weak those punches was! No wonder I put you away so easy.”

Don Cornleone shook violently as his face turned amber with fury. “*Nobody mocks the Don!*”

Cornleone charged Raphael with his fists ready, but quickly found himself lifted into the air. Raphael had the Don by his corny waist, and he slammed him down onto the rocks. “Sorry, baby, but I don’t got no time to play with no jive turkeys.”

The Don tried to jump to his feet but his body wouldn’t move; he was stuck squirming on the ground.

“That’s the patented Raisin Pile Driver. You ain’t gettin’ up for least half an hour, Donny.”

Raphael dusted himself off and walked towards the Applerigine tribesman laying on the ground and offered his glove to the man.

“Need a hand, brotha?”

The apple was shocked, but slowly took Raphael’s glove.

The rest of the tribe were surprised by the raisin’s generosity, and they whispered to each other and gestured towards one of the tribesmen.

The tribesman nodded to the others and reached into a satchel to retrieve Raphael’s Glockamole. He approached the hip young raisin and offered his weapon to him.

The tribe of Applerigines kept a close eye on him, but Raphael slowly put the gun in his holster and flashed them a thumbs up. The Applerigines smiled to each other and gave Raphael the same gesture.

“R...R...Raisin! This ain’t over!” The Don called from his crippled position.

“Actually, my dear boy, I’m afraid to say that it is over,” said a voice from above the cavern. The sounds of a plane flying above the temple could be heard through the crack in the cavern’s ceiling.

Raphael looked upwards in confusion as a look of panic crossed Don Cornleone’s face. “No...*no*! Please! Give me one more chance!”

The plane drew closer as the cavern’s ceiling began opening up. “Sorry, old bean, but we at C.I.T.R.U.S. aren’t so forgiving.”

The voice chuckled as the cavern’s ceiling opened completely, shining beaming rays of light from the sun right onto Don Cornleone. “Please! Not that!”

Raphael looked to the opened ceiling to see a tall Greek grape man standing atop a massive plane, wearing nothing more than a toga.

“We *shall* meet again, young raisin. I look forward to it.”

As the plane took off with the grape man inside of it, Raphael turned to look at Don Cornleone writhing in agony in the sunlight. The Don’s body began to pop outwards as the sun bore down on him, steam rising from his ear. As the Don screamed his body expanded and sizzled, bits of him bursting to the sky as some form of popped corn.

In a matter of moments, Cornleone left nothing remaining of his ambitions but a large pile of this popped corn, and a charred empty karate uniform.

Chapter 7

Spinach II Society

Raphael looked on in horror at the remains of the former Mafia Don while two of the Applerigines brought forward another raisin who had been tied up and knocked out. Raphael sighed with relief as he saw Ricky Raisin in their arms.

“You cats ain’t half bad y’know that? Tell y’what, if me and my brothers make it out of this in one piece, you officially got a front row seat to our next show. Can you dig it?”

The Applerigines smiled to one another as a member of their tribe walked forward. “That’d be great, the boys and I really love music.”

Raphael scratched his wrinkled head as he looked to the Applerigines’ spokesman. “I didn’t think you cats could talk.”

“No, we can, we just don’t like people making fun of our accents,” said the chief.

Raphael was shocked, for once it was he who was promoting raisism. “Well, I just learned a damn good lesson, brothas. I owe ya all big time. You hit me up and we’ll party like it’s 1986 ya feel me?” The Applerigines smiled and gave Raphael a thumbs up, though they still weren’t quite sure how to elaborate their feeling as eloquently as a raisin could. They guided Raphael to the end of the cave while safely carrying the unconscious Ricky Raisin along with them.

* * *

Melanie looked at the clock and realized that nearly three hours had passed since Raphael departed for the Maize Maze.

“I should have just let him go into the Factory. That Maze is too dangerous for any one man to go into!” Melanie took a drink of water as she placed her hands on the table. “But if I don’t believe in you, I’m just as bad as the Chief. Aren’t I?”

Melanie pushed a green button on her Comprunicator and entered the access code on the back panel. The Comprunicator's brilliant technology allowed members of CALRAB to contact one another by inputting an easy to remember 33 digit code. Melanie initiated the code sequence and began to speak.

"Is there any progress with Reginald?"

A young woman's voice responded from the other end. "Afraid not, Mel. it's nothing he won't recover from, but I can tell you one thing: these marks weren't self inflicted. This was something different for sure."

Melanie looked at her charts with frustration as she spoke into the mic.

"Keep looking, I have a feeling there's more at work here than your typical kidnapping."

"No problem, Mel. I'll keep you posted."

Melanie input the code in the reverse order to disconnect from the medical feed, then input the code for Raphael's. During the quick dialing process she was surprised to see Raphael teleport into the chamber with Ricky in his arms.

"it's good to see you back, Agent Purple. Did the Maze offer you any difficulty?"

"Nah baby, but I saw some stuff that we really gotta talk about."

* * *

"A man made out of grapes? You think he might be behind all this?"

"Well he was sayin' some funky stuff about seein' me again. He offed the Don like it wasn't no thing either." Raphael looked at the ground as he contemplated everything that had happened in the insidious Maze.

"it's entirely possible C.I.T.R.U.S. is recruiting new members from defunct crime syndicates. I just can't fathom why they'd go to the trouble of freeing Don Cornleone. You said this grape man seemed to be in charge of Cornleone?"

"Hell, he might be the big cheese of all of them C.I.T.R.U.S. Boys, baby. It ain't no nevermind right now though, I got two more brothers to save."

"Are you sure you don't need to rest a moment, Agent Purple? You look exhausted."

Raphael cracked his back and shook his body from side to side. "A raisin never sleeps baby."

"Yeah, not unless they're doin' it on someone else's dime, am I right?"

Raphael didn't even look. The savage mutterings of the Chief were something he was used to by now.

Chief Lemon blew smoke in the direction of Raphael as he sat down at the table, staring at Ricky on the couch. "Most of the time I see two raisins in a room with a pretty young girl I think the best idea is to call the peach fuzz. What do you think, Purple?"

Lance exposed his grimy yellow teeth in a snide smile at Raphael. The raisin didn't say a word. He couldn't go after the Chief today, not while his brothers were still the main priority.

"From the sound of things you coulda killed that Cornleone bastard. You realize what could happen if you kill the wrong guy on one of our missions, raisin? You really want the High Council on your ass?"

Melanie began to speak up, but before she could say a word Raphael turned to the Chief. "Nobody's died yet. Just some ugly barrel and a talkin' head," he said sternly.

"See to it those are the only messes my boys gotta clean up. Y'got that?" The Chief looked over at Ricky and scoffed. "Might wanna check this one's arms too. See if you got another drug addict raisin to throw in my emergency ward."

Lance walked out of the room in disgust. Melanie looked apologetically towards Raphael. "Lance was wrong, Agent Purple. We ran several diagnostics on Reginald but nothing came back positive for narcotics. We're still figuring out his problem. Don't let the Chief get to you."

"Thanks baby. I shoulda known that sourpuss just wanted to mouth off." Raphael reluctantly looked at Ricky's arms only to see more of the same markings that Reginald had. "Ricky was clean as a whistle. Couldn't even get that boy to drink 'less it was his birthday, y'dig? Somethin' ain't right about this whole thing, baby."

Raphael walked towards the two remaining transport tubes, after staring at the Factory tube for a moment, he instead turned towards the tube labeled "Grapevine."

"Don't worry, Agent Purple. I'll make sure Ricky gets taken care of while you're gone. Just be careful...and good luck."

Raphael shot Melanie a gooey thumbs up as he waddled into the Grapevine tube, where he was teleported, molecule by molecule, into the Grapevine of the Amazon rainforest.

Raphael looked to the sky and saw several large red planes of the same model that the Greek Graper had been flying on. He cocked his Glockamole, and prepared to defend himself from the violent assault from above.

Chapter 8

Once Upon A Time: When Kiwi Were Colored

The lush forests of the Amazon were beautiful to the eye, but Raphael smelled the faint scent of C.I.T.R.U.S. treachery.

“Smells like someone lit a goddamn durian ’round here.”

He tried to find the source of the smell but only saw small holes with steam rising from them, and several trees that had been uprooted. Raphael looked to the sky and saw one of the large red planes begin to dive towards a large cluster of trees, dropping small green objects into them and immediately flying back upwards.

Raphael grabbed his Comprunicator and switched it to Melanie’s feed. “Baby come in, I’m seein’ big old red planes droppin’ somethin’ green and nasty in the forest.”

“Sounds like a P-52 Bomber you’re describing, Agent Purple. They were developed for peaceful measures but recently they’ve been auctioned off to the highest bidder. C.I.T.R.U.S. was rumored to have them and even developed some kind of pollution devices. They must be trying to ruin the forests for some reason.”

“Lootin’ *and* pollutin’? Baby, that ain’t the way. I’m gonna bring ’em all down. Just you wait.”

Raphael climbed a nearby grapevine and looked to the sky. He made out faint green figures inside of the planes, but there was no time to waste. He had information to gather and only a few ugly pilots to get it from. Raphael took aim at the closest plane with his Glockamole, targeting the large engine hanging off of it.

“Smile you son of a...”

Raphael fired a juicy gooey purple bullet as his face twisted to a look of complete relaxation. The bullet flew true as an arrow and landed dead center on the P-52’s engine, causing an enormous explosion in the

sky. The small green pilot was obliterated as well. Raphael gazed in shock at the gun in his hand.

“Damn, I really do pack a punch don’t I? I oughta give some ladies a call and make sure there ain’t any raisinettes runnin around.”

The other three planes sped up and flew towards the source of the explosion. As soon as Raphael saw the pilots talking into some sort of device, he immediately pulled out his Communicator and entered the 27 digit hacking code.

“KIWI-4 TO KIWI-1, OVER,” a gruff authoritative voice said. “KIWI-2 IS DOWN. WE NEED YOU AND KIWI-3 SURVEYING THE AREA, OVER.”

“KIWI-4 THIS IS KIWI-3, OVER. I’m GONNA DROP A LOAD OF PEATROL BOMBS TO CLEAR OUT THE FOREST, OVER.”

“KIWI-3 YOU ARE CLEARED FOR DROPPING. OVER.”

“Can’t believe them C.I.T.R.U.S. boys got the Flyin’ Kiwis doin’ their dirty work. Those jive turkeys oughta stayed at the circus doin’ tricks. Just what the hell is this Peatrol? That what made that nasty ass smell?” Raphael talked to himself for little discernible reason.

One of the enormous planes with a massive 3 emblazoned on the side flew close to the tree Raphael was clinging to. As the plane flew past, it caused a massive gust of wind, blowing the trees ferociously.

Raphael looked down to see that several of the trees had small green blobs attached to them. The blobs burst into disgusting piles of light green goo that began to chew through the trees. “Goddamn, they got some liquid termites or something in those things.”

Raphael looked down and noticed a Peatrol bomb had landed on the tree he was clinging too as well.

“Damn. I got one more shot before the tree gives out!”

Raphael steadied his aim. He held his left hand against the back of the Glockamole and fired carefully at Kiwi-3’s wing. The blast of salty purple goo shot like a rocket and hit the plane.

“KIWI-1 THIS IS KIWI-3, MY PLANE IS HIT, OVER!”

Kiwi-3 swerved rapidly trying to avoid Kiwi-1 on its right, but to no avail. Kiwi-3 rammed into Kiwi-1.

“KIWI-3, KIWI-1 THIS IS KIWI-4. DO YOU COPY?”

The two P-52 planes smashed into each other, and then fell to the earth and exploded massively. Just as they did, the tree Raphael held onto gave way to his raising weight and dropped him off of it.

Raphael lay still for a moment looking at the wreckage of the planes, but just as he took a breath he saw the final plane, Kiwi-4, flying at top speed right towards him!

He could hear the pilot screaming through the Communicator. "I SEE YOU NOW, RAISIN, AND NOBODY GETS AWAY WITH BREAKING UP THE FLYIN' KIWIS!"

Raphael raised his gun. Kiwi 4's plane dove closer and closer as Raphael aimed at the propeller. Raphael pulled the trigger.

Kiwi 4 screamed in horror. "THE PLANE'S GOING DOWN! GODDAMN RAISIN!"

The tail of the plane dragged across the ground, causing a tremor that ripped through the dirt. Raphael sank into the earth below him, with Kiwi-4 falling in after him, slamming into the dirt below.

Raphael gently hoisted himself up from the dirt and examined his surroundings underneath the Grapevine. Raphael could only make out massive tree roots coming from above and descending even further below the Earth. He ran over to the wreckage of Kiwi-4 and peered into the cockpit.

Kiwi-4's dead body was in the seat, eyes still open, crumpled in a bloody mess. "Damn fool...almost feel bad for 'em. I know what it's like to go crazy for your brothers."

Raphael's stern expression turned melancholy as he saluted the fallen Kiwi-4.

"I heard you cats had money trouble, but I didn't think I'd see ya here. Take it easy wherever y'all go...y'dig?"

A tear rolled down his face as he gently closed Kiwi-4's eyelids.

"Very touching, raisin. You almost fooled me into thinking one of CALRAB's doormats had some emotion in him."

Raphael grabbed his gun and twisted around. "I couldn't forget that voice in ten thousand years, but I didn't think they was in the business of hirin' midgets, Pomello!"

"That's Paolo Pomello to you! And I'd be careful talking size with me now, raisin! C.I.T.R.U.S. has hooked me up with some new tech that'll give me a real leg up on you!"

Pomello was still hidden somewhere in the darkness. Suddenly the entire cavern shook for a few seconds, briefly stopped, and then shook again. Raphael could hear Pomello's high pitched laughs getting higher with each quake, until finally, out of the shadows, he saw a disgusting sight.

The miniscule Pomello, only about 7 inches tall, was situated inside a gargantuan 5-foot tall mechanical replica of a human foot!

"Goddamn what is it with all y'all C.I.T.R.U.S. boys lookin' ugly as hell?"

Pomello flashed a demonic smirk, finally having the height advantage over an opponent, and pulled a lever in front of him using his miniscule green arm.

The massive foot shook violently and sprang to life, jettisoning itself up above Raphael. The brave raisin darted from underneath the foot machine mere seconds before it stomped the ground beneath it. Raphael gasped for breath as Pomello looked down on the rock and roll raisin.

"Sleeping on the job, little man? Well, then let me tuck you in!" Pomello's foot hopped into the sky as Raphael looked on with panic. He swiftly rolled to the side, just narrowly avoiding being flattened. Raphael panted on the ground as he looked to Pomello.

"Man, I never thought I'd actually be in danger fighting someone small as a baby."

Pomello's face twisted in disgust as he turned a knob inside of the cockpit, causing the foot machine to lurch back and kick Raphael straight back towards the plane wreckage. Raphael landed in the broken down Kiwi-4. "You think you're so tough just cause you're bigger? I've had it with people looking down on me! I'll crush everyone beneath me!"

Pomello began to shift the controls as Raphael shuffled inside of the broken down plane. Raphael looked down and saw a large, open crate inside the remains of the plane.

Raphael climbed out and stood at the top of the plane wreckage, right in Pomello's line of sight. He crossed the fingers on his left glove.

"First time in my life, I hope C.I.T.R.U.S. did somethin' right..." He then took aim and threw it at Pomello's cockpit.

Pomello's ferocity subsided as he looked down at the control panel and saw a pile of green goo splattered over the control pad. "A Peatrol bomb? You son of a *bitch!*"

But as Pomello tried to grip the controls, his hands recoiled, feeling the acidic sting of the Peatrol. Raphael cracked his knuckles and stood proud with another Peatrol bomb in hand.

“I can keep this up, little man! If you wanna burn alive in a big ass foot it’s your call!”

The foot controls began to smoke and spark as Pomello unhooked himself from the cockpit, and leapt from the malfunctioning machine to the rocks below him.

Sparks flew from the control panel of the giant foot, and Pomello pulled from his pocket a remote control with a large yellow button in the middle.

“I’m not done yet. I can still smash everyone, even from down below! You haven’t beaten me yet, raisin!”

“Actually, I already have.”

Pomello felt a shiver run up his stem as the cold steel of the Glockamole pressed against the back of his head.

“Y’better drop that little toy or they’re gonna be hosin’ you off the floor, kid.”

Pomello’s thumb shuddered. The malfunctioning foot sat with steaming controls above both fruits as Raphael stood cold with the tip of his gun against Paolo Pomello. A breeze ran through the cave.

Pomello let the controller clatter to the floor. Instead of placing his hands in the sky, Pomello began to slowly clap.

“Nicely played, raisin. I didn’t think one of CALRAB’s bootlickers had it in him. You really were about to put a hole in my head, weren’t you?”

Pomello turned around to see Raphael standing firm. “You ain’t off the hook, shorty, ’cause I got some things I gotta know.”

Raphael pulled the hammer back as a look of shock crossed Pomello’s face. Paolo took a step backwards in fear. “I...I don’t know much. They just asked me if I wanted to make a name for myself, so I agreed to do whatever they asked me.”

Raphael took a step closer to Paolo, “Is this cause we busted you for slingin’ Juice? Is that all this is about?”

Paolo looked disappointed. “C.I.T.R.U.S. said they’d keep the Pomello family safe if I worked with ’em. I’ve been working for my brothers, but I know they’re just ashamed of someone like me.”

Raphael lowered his gun. "No brother worth their mustard thinks of a brotha as a shame! You just been a damn fool, Pomello! Livin' your life like you're nothin' but small. You more than, that ya dummy!"

The words from Raphael's enormous lips rang throughout the cavern. Paolo was shocked. Ever since birth he was nothing but a short man. Could life have more in store for him?

Paolo pulled a small device out of his pocket and pointed it towards the rocks behind Raphael. "I owe you this one, raisin."

The hollow rocks opened up, revealing the exhausted, strained, short, fat body of Ronald Raisin.

Ronald stood up and looked towards Pomello, "Well...well...I'ma *smash* that little bitch!"

Ronald charged towards Paolo but Raphael held out his arm to stop his younger brother. "Nah bruh, this guy ain't half bad. Don't worry 'bout it."

Ronald looked towards his brother, then nodded and hugged him. "Raphael, I never thought I was gonna see you again, bruh! I missed you so much I thought I was gonna have to go solo! Haw haw haw!"

Raphael looked down at Ronald's arms and saw the same suspicious markings, then turned towards Pomello.

"Aight man, I got one more question for ya y'dig? What the hell's up with these marks on my brothas' arms?"

Paolo wore a look of intensity. "Well, raisin, those markings are from our production plant at the Factory. Your brothers are probably going to be a bit woozy for a little while after they..."

"I think you've said *quite* enough, little boy!"

The effeminate voice came from behind the foot machine. The mysterious grape man in a toga emerged and began walking towards Paolo. A look of fear shot across Pomello's face as he turned to face him. "Jucius, please! Just understand, I need to leave C.I.T.R.U.S. and be my own man. I don't need to be protected anymore."

Jucius Caesar laughed regally. "Quite right you are Pomello. We wouldn't want someone as pathetic as you in our ranks anyway!"

Pomello leapt at Jucius with his fists ready, but was immediately felled by a backhand from the ferocious emperor. Pomello shuddered as he turned back to the raisin brothers. "Get out of here now...and thank you. I'll never forget what you told me Raphael!"

“Man you get outta here with us! That crazy sucka’ll kill you!”

Paolo’s face turned grave. “I know.”

Raphael grabbed his brother by the hand and shouted towards Paolo. “Adios....Pomello.”

Paolo smiled to the raisins as they ran far away from the battlefield. Jucius sneered and he grabbed the remote control Pomello had dropped earlier.

“Such a small, useless little man. I think I’ve discovered the *perfect* fate for a fool like you. Ohohohoh!”

Paolo held his arms out as Jucius moved towards him, brandishing the remote control like a blade.

“I hope you’ve made peace, little one. Soon you’ll be with your family in Hell.”

Pomello’s face turned lime with horror. “Jucius...you said that they’d be...”

Jucius cackled and turned on the mechanical foot. “They were as worthless as you, little child. We had to get rid of all that compost.”

The massive foot leapt high into the air, and it landed on Pomello. Jucius’s laughter rang through the cavern but stopped abruptly when he saw the foot machine being lifted up slightly, just barely, by Pomello.

“Worthless...useless...those words don’t mean anything, Jucius!”

Pomello held the foot above him as the machine jittered and shook.

“Every person on this planet has merit! C.I.T.R.U.S. doesn’t understand that. All you have is that Factory, and he’ll find that soon. I’m putting the faith of the entire Pomello family in that raisin!”

Jucius continued fiddling with the controller to crush Pomello.

“I may be small, but I’m not...not worthless. I’m Paolo Pomello! Even if I can’t do a thing to stop you, he will. *He’ll kill you! He’ll kill you! He’ll kill the both of you!!*”

“You...you will not speak of him that way, you filthy child!”

Jucius mashed the remote control, and all that could be heard in the cavern was a massive stomp.

The pink blood would stain the cavern for years to come, and much like the courage of the man who had stood there, it would never be washed away.

Chapter 9

Do the Ripe Thing

Ronald Raisin lay across the sofa while Melanie examined the markings on his arms.

“Are you feeling all right? Do you remember anything about what happened?”

Ronald looked towards the beautiful Melanie. “Well, I don’t remember nothin’ baby, but how’s about we go on out on a date and see if y’all can refresh my memory?”

Melanie rolled her eyes at the young raisin and walked over to Raphael, who was sitting at the table with his head held low. “The Kiwis was brothers...Pomello just wanted to help his family...what sick son of a bitch is gonna use people like that?”

“Whoever’s in charge preys on them, Agent Purple. In another life, in another world, they could have tried to use you to commit crimes. What you’re doing will keep people safe from them in the future. You can’t lose sight of that.”

Raphael looked at her with concern. “Yea, but only if I get to the top man. That toga-wearing turkey, I owe him a real solid shot right in the grapes for Pomello.”

In spite of the urgency of the conversation, the chubby little Ronald Raisin had fallen asleep on the couch. That silly raisin always knew how to lighten the mood with his comical negligence! For once though, Raphael was unable to smile at his brother’s hilarious antics, as he was wondering why C.I.T.R.U.S. Hadn’t tried to involve him in their crimes as well. He was an abundant resource of kung fu and stealthy action, so it seemed like a no-brainer they’d try to manipulate him as well. What could those monsters possibly have planned for he and the rest of the California Raisins?

Raphael stood up and shifted the holster with his gun. There would be no answers unless he had all four of his brothers with him.

He stood proud and strong. His fears weren't enough to prevent him from saving the last of his brothers. "Baby...keep that Comprunicator on. May need some help inside that dank ol' place."

Melanie looked hesitant, but she smiled and nodded. "Of course, Agent Purple. I'm here for you."

Raphael walked over to Ronald and leaned next to his goofball of a brother. "Hey Ronny, I got Rick and Reg home safe and sound too. Melanie gonna take ya down there to chill with 'em and see if they can't fix up those arms. Sound good, bro?"

"Course, big bruh! You just make sure they don't hook somethin' up to my nuts too aight!? Haw haw haw!!"

Raphael smiled and patted his brother on his fat wrinkled forehead. He shuffled the holsters for his Comprunicator and his Glockamole into position as he prepared to step inside the transport tube for the fiendish Factory.

"Hold on just a moment, Agent Purple."

Raphael stopped himself and looked back. "Baby, you been actin' real funny lately. Somethin' about this Factory gettin' ya all hot and bothered?"

Melanie turned and looked at Ronald. "I just wanted to say...you've done an amazing job saving them. Whatever C.I.T.R.U.S. is doing, you're taking them head on. I'm proud, Agent Purple. Nobody could have done this but you."

Raphael looked at Melanie with caution. "Baby...what is it?"

Melanie guided Raphael towards the table and sat across from him, folding her hands together. "Agent Purple, I just need you to promise me something. I can't explain much right now, but I need you to promise me that whatever happens at the Factory, whatever you might see, you won't lose sight of what you need to do."

Melanie looked Raphael dead in his beady eyes, she'd never been this serious before. "Whadaya think I'm gonna see there that makes me give it all up baby?"

"I need you to promise me, nothing will happen to you no matter what you see."

"Aight baby, I'll be fine. Gimme a little credit aight? I seen some bad stuff in my day, I can handle whateva they buildin' there."

"As long as you promise you'll be okay, I can let you go. Just know that your brothers are safe here, okay?"

Raphael patted Melanie on the shoulder and chuckled, “Y’all must think I’m a real bad apple, baby. Ain’t nothin’ gonna stop me from drainin’ all the C.I.T.R.U.S. from this city.”

There was no going back. As Raphael walked into the tube and began to dissolve, he could see Melanie staring at him. When he was gone, she sulked outside the tube and whispered, “Don’t forget what you promised me. I need you here.”

Chief Lance walked into the room with the melancholy Melanie. “Don’t get too close to a raisin, sweetheart. it’s gonna end in heartbreak.”

The Chief sat at the table and looked at the young doctor with pain in his eyes.

“Or let em get too close to people you love. You may never see em again...”

Chief Lance pulled out his wallet and opened it to a small wrinkled picture. The picture was of a middle-aged lemon in a tuxedo, smiling wide as he held a beautiful lemon woman in a wedding dress.

Lance lit a cigarette and mournfully put his wallet away. The sounds of Ronald Raisin’s snores were all that could be heard in the room as Melanie and Lance sat in silence.

Chapter 10

Plum and Plumber

It had been several years since Raphael had bothered stepping foot into the Factory. It had always been rundown, and nothing more than a place for blooming young fruit to come and make love, or for dealers to sling their Juice at unsuspecting people.

That's why he was amazed to see a rather modern looking Factory with countless blue pipes and conveyor belts running all over the place.

"Man, someone got a fat check to nice this joint up."

The raisin looked for some kind of clue as to where his brother was, but all he found were pipes venting steam. Raphael held his gun close as he wandered down the dark passages of the Factory, looking for any signs of life.

He encountered more pipes, all of which seemed to lead into large vats. This Factory had the faint smell of something, and though Raphael couldn't quite pinpoint what it could be, the stench grew stronger the further he ventured into the Factory. As Raphael looked for anything of interest, he came across a large vine that let downward. Adjusting his belt, Raphael slid down it until he came to a large, baby blue hallway with several unique pipe fixtures and fans. Before he was able to progress any further, he was met with a shocking sight ahead of him.

Two limes wearing purple overalls and baseball caps were walking right towards Raphael's current position, talking to one another.

One plumber was short and stout, and the other was tall and lanky. They looked like any normal lime you'd see walking down the street. Raphael immediately climbed back up the vine and held himself steady a fair distance above the limes as they walked towards the edge of the corridor, both holding clipboards.

The short lime said to the other, “Nah, all the plumbing’s lookin’ good down here, Larry. The Factory’s in tip top shape!”

The tall lime replied, “Yeah, shame the land deal on the Maize Maze isn’t going through yet, ’ey Luigi? Those Applerigines would have been perfect for us.”

The plumbers examined the pipes while writing notes on their pads. They then returned the way they came, down the long and winding tunnel of pipes. Raphael slid back down the vine as he muttered to himself. “The hell they wanna do with the Applerigines?”

Raphael waited for the plumbers to move further down the blue tunnel and then he tailed them silently. “Neva liked this stealth shit, but ya gotta do what ya gotta do.”

He saw the two stop near a staircase and promptly hid himself behind a jumbled mess of pipes.

Larry plugged his nose as he turned to his co-worker. “No matter how long they got us workin’ this gig I’ll never get used to the smell, man.”

Luigi shook his head. “Well, sorry that Juice doesn’t always smell so great gettin’ made. They got the ingredients ready upstairs?”

Larry nodded and smiled as Raphael looked on from behind the pipes. “Juice?” Raphael whispered, causing his enormous lips to clang against one of the pipes he was hiding against.

Larry heard it.

“Hold on a sec, I think there’s something wrong with these pipes.” Raphael started to sweat as the plumber walked towards him with his wrench drawn.

Luigi tugged on his collar. “Don’t worry about all the nitty gritty. We gotta make sure the Juice gets cooked upstairs without a hitch!”

Raphael poured sweat as the two lime plumbers made their way up the stairs. The stairway path was split between a room far ahead, and a small room off to the side with a large vat inside of it. The plumbers veered into the vat room, observing the massive vat with a clear glass window showing a multicolored swirl of liquid splashing about.

“Looks like everything’s mixing just fine in here. Gotta give the boss credit. He’s pickin out some fantastic ingredients for the new shipment of Juice!”

“Yeah, but he never gets my favorite flavor. C’mon, let’s go check out the new batch.”

Raphael hid himself out of sight while the plumbers left the vat room, and then he darted inside to see exactly what was of intrigue.

There was nothing in the room aside from a window into the container and a large sign reading “Jelly Vat.” The swirling colors observable through the window to the vat were almost hypnotic in their beauty.

“Damn, looks like a Vincent Man Gough paintin’.”

The sounds of the Jelly splashing against the glass muted out even the deepest sigh. Raphael silently walked upstairs, hiding himself around the corner to watch the plumbers. The entire room up here was gorgeous; there were beautiful multi-colored walls lined with majestic murals, and a golden railing encircled part of a massive hole in the middle of the room, leading directly into the Jelly Vat below.

An enormous chandelier hung in the room, shining light into the hole below it. The only odd thing was a large, silver, steel door that was padlocked twice over. Faint noises could be heard inside.

Luigi lifted up a small walkie talkie from his belt. “We’re in, boss. Are you ready to make your pick?”

A loud scream erupted from the silver door. “it’s SHOWTIME BOYS!!!” the voice bellowed. The door flung open, and a skinny banana with a bandanna emerged.

The banana’s pupils were dilated; he appeared to be quite skinny, but had a relatively muscular upper body. He was a jittery and frantic man with track marks running up and down his arms. Raphael peered out to get a closer look, and then his eyes grew wide.

“That’s one a them Bananno Brothers! C.I.T.R.U.S. pulled out the damn stops gettin’ some real thugs in on this one.”

The banana was escorted over to the padlocked door where both Larry and Luigi produced a key from their pockets. “Hope you find a good one today, boss,” Luigi said.

“Yeah, we should have a nice crop ripe for the pickin’,” Larry chuckled.

The two plumbers each unlocked a padlock on the door and opened it. The sight inside the door was so horrifying Raphael had to hold his colossal lips shut to prevent himself from screaming. Inside the padlocked door were at least 30 fruits blindfolded and tied up, with duct tape over their mouths, all completely naked. From a pomegranate in his late 50s to a 20-something jujube, they had been stripped of all their dignity and laid inside the room like livestock.

Never had Raphael seen such disgusting disregard for a fruit's life. The Bananno Brother laughed as he spun around like a child.

"You guys got a *damn* fine line-up today. I'm in the mood for something real fun!"

Bananno grabbed a middle-aged pumpkin with a large brown mustache from the pile of prisoners and threw him onto the ground. Bananno forcefully ripped the duct tape off of his mouth and leaned over him.

"Tell me why it shouldn't be you," Bananno whispered to the pumpkin.

The pumpkin gasped for breath as he shuddered for words. "I...I have a family. My son needs...he needs his daddy, sir. Please don't...don't hurt me!"

Bananno suddenly lost his gleeful smile and looked full of remorse.

"Guys...this pumpkin's telling the truth. I think I should probably reconsider my decision. What's your name, buddy?"

The pumpkin's voice was filled with stunned fear. "it's...it's Peter. My son he's...he's only five."

Bananno nodded quietly as he helped Peter to his feet. "Well, Peter, I'd say you deserve the right to be with your family as much as anyone. I oughta loosen up all this junk my boys put on ya."

Bananno led Peter around the large hole in the center of the room and began to undo his blindfold before reaching into his own pocket. "Th-th-thank you so much. I just need to be with..."

Before Peter could say another word, he felt a throbbing pain underneath his stem. Bananno pulled a small switchblade out from Peter's back. He licked the blood from his knife and leaned in to the pumpkin. "Your son's next."

Bananno shoved Peter into the vat below without a second thought. The plumbers stood smiling as a massive splash of Jelly came flying into the sky. The boiling liquid left not a single trace of Peter Pumpkin.

Bananno began laughing uproariously as he threw his switchblade into the air and caught it. Licking his lips, he turned to the plumbers. "Y'know boys, 'Ol Peter Pumpkin was pretty tasty. Better go round up that whole family of his. I'll bet they'll make a *real* tasty batch a' Juicel!"

Raphael's body froze as the words entered into his mind. "J-Juice?" he whispered. "They...they gotta be full of it. Juice is...Juice is really..."

Bananno laughed as an orange waft of steam rose from the Jelly Vat, and then dissipated in the air.

Chapter 11

Mo' Better Blueberries

Raphael ran as fast as he could back into the room with the Jelly Vat, covering his mouth with both hands to prevent himself from vomiting. He was shaking in absolute panic as he looked through the window into the vat and saw floating orange chunks reaching the bottom and melting away. Raphael stifled his screams and held himself against a wall.

“WHY...WHAT...WHAT THE FUCK IS THEY DOIN?!”

Raphael’s cries were only muffled by the sound of the splashing Jelly. He fell to his knees and held his head to the ground trying to forget the horrific truth. Raphael’s shaking hand dialed Melanie.

“B-Baby I...I need. Baby I need help.”

Melanie knew from his tone of voice exactly what he’d seen. “Agent Purple, I’m so sorry I couldn’t tell you. Please understand, we had to...”

Raphael could not keep his voice from trembling. “Baby I...they...that cat had a family.”

“Please, Agent Purple...we only learned about this a few days ago. I didn’t want to risk you going into this mission with the wrong mindset. You deserved an explanation but...I didn’t want you to risk your brothers’ safety because of this.”

Raphael pounded the wall before him.

“Agent Purple...please say something. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I swear.”

Raphael couldn’t even form words, all he was able to do was moan in sadness. Every single kid who was fooled into taking a hit of Juice, were they murderers too? Did they have any idea what they were doing? The scumbags selling Juice on the street, did they have any idea whose lives they’d ruined to get a few bucks?

Melanie sat down in the Transportation Bay with her Communicator held close. She never thought Raphael would handle the reality with this much grief. Chief Lemon stood behind her, a solemn look behind his cigarette.

Go on, ruisin, show us all who you really are. Go in there guns a blazin' like the psycho you are, Lance thought to himself.

The sounds of Raphael's tortured sobs were all they could hear over the Communicator.

Raphael got slowly to his feet as he finally cleared his throat. He reached for his Glockamole with his free hand. "Baby...baby I'm so sorry. I can't...this ain't it, baby. This ain't how it's sposed to be!"

He placed the gun in his mouth.

"I just can't live with these Juicy bastards anymore, baby."

"Agent Purple! Please don't do it! you're the only one who can stop this!"

Chief Lemon's expression turned to shock. No violent outbursts, no rampages, no charging at the enemies for revenge. Nothing but compassion for his fellow fruit could be felt inside that raisin. The Chief was rendered completely speechless.

"I'm begging you...they need you....I need you," Melanie sobbed into the Communicator.

Tears rolled from Raphael's eyes as the cord from his genitals slowly filled with fluid. The Glockamole was almost ready to fire. Raphael couldn't stop thinking of his brothers. What would they say when they found out he was gone? It didn't matter. As long as they were safe he knew they could regroup. Raphael couldn't save all the innocent fruit turned into Juice. No matter what he was able to do today, he'd already lost. Raphael pulled the hammer on his gun back, ready to atone for what he let happen.

The soft voice of a woman broke through Melanie's sobs. "Please let me speak with him, Mel...he's an old friend."

Melanie turned to the figure and handed her the Communicator. "Please...do anything you can," Melanie said through her tears.

Raphael bit his lip as he held the gun in his mouth. "I'm sorry baby."

His finger felt for the trigger as a voice erupted from the Communicator. "Ain't *nobody* but *nobody* gonna come back from the dead, y'dig?!"

Raphael's eyes opened as the gun slowly came out of his mouth. "P...Paula?"

"You can do whateva ya want, but killin' yourself ain't gonna do *jack!*" she yelled. "Sound familiar? An old friend told me that a long time ago..."

Raphael dropped the gun to the floor as he looked at the Comprunicator. "Kid...I...I neva thought Juice was...this is all fucked. What world I been livin' in, kid?"

"Nothing's changed, Agent Purple. you're still the only who can stop C.I.T.R.U.S. from making more Juice. You can't change the past...but the future is still in your hands. Your brothers are safe here, and I might have some good news for you."

Raphael tried to catch his breath. "Y...yeah? My bros is okay?"

"Well, they're going to be fine, we just had to get them a transfusion. Those holes on their arms were used to draw blood, likely in the production of Juice. Don't worry, Agent Purple, not all the Juice on the street means death. All producers are creating it differently."

Raphael balled his glove into a fist. "That banana...those grapes...they the ones that need to go down. Yo, Paula...thanks kid. I almost lost my seeds there for a minute."

"Of course. But I think the one you need to thank is Mel. She's been monitoring this mission every step of the way."

Melanie dried her tears and blushed while speaking towards the Comprunicator. "I just...I felt so bad for not being able to tell you the truth. I hope you can forgive me."

"Ain't a thing baby, I can't stay upset at a beautiful lady."

Melanie smiled and sighed deeply. Paula walked out of the bay as Chief Lemon sat down at the table in complete disbelief. "That raisin was just...just like..."

Melanie sniffled and looked towards the Chief. "He remind you of someone, Lance?"

Chief Lemon folded his hands and lowered his head.

Raphael stood tall inside the Jelly Vat room and grabbed his gun from off the ground. The stalwart raisin looked towards the room at the top of the stairs and furrowed his brow.

"Sorry, Bananno. You bout to have one bad goddamn day."

Chapter 12

Goodbye Banana

Bananno stared down into the deep Vat of Jelly and then looked at the locked door, holding his prisoners. “Y’know, boys...it’s looking gorgeous, but I think it could use a little more color.”

He snapped his fingers and the plumbers unlocked the steel door again. Bananno galloped towards his hostages and smiled from ear to ear as he looked at all of the fruits.

“Hello there, beautiful. How’d I miss someone as gorgeous as you?” He picked up a young cherry woman and held her against him as she tried to pull away. “Aw, what’s wrong baby? C’mon, let’s get a whiff of the juice.”

Bananno took the cherry woman over to the hole, holding her close, and he gestured for the plumbers to come with him as well. The three villainous fruits looked into the vat while Bananno shoved the cherry woman the ground.

“This batch is missin’ somethin. it’s gotta be perfect before we ship it. What do you guys think we should add?”

Larry scratched his chin. “Well, it could use a little crimson I think.”

Luigi shook his head. “Nah. I think maybe blue would look good. There’s a blueberry in the room, too!”

Bananno laughed and patted the limes on the back. “Boys, you’re both wrong. But close! Y’wanna know what we need in it now?”

“What’s that boss?”

Bananno’s face turned to a wicked grin. “We need...green.”

Before the plumbers could react, Bananno grabbed Luigi and Larry by the back of their jumpsuits and threw them into the Jelly Vat.

The plumbers' screams echoed until they melted away. Bananno turned to the young cherry woman attempting to crawl away.

"Sorry, sweetie, I'm the one calling the shots around here. you're next."

He grabbed the crawling cherry by her neck.

"Maybe I should have a little fun with you before you go swimmin'?"

"Hey! Let that cherry down easy, or I'ma peel you the hard way!"

Raphael stood in front of the stairs with his gun cocked and pointed at Bananno. Bananno dropped the cherry woman and put his hands above his head with a bizarre grin.

The cherry crawled away from Bananno, and Raphael helped her up. "You okay now, baby, he ain't gonna get ya."

As Raphael spoke to the cherry woman, Bananno took a switchblade out of his pocket and hurled it at Raphael's right hand. The knife stabbed deep into his glove as he dropped his Glockamole and howled in pain.

Bananno charged at Raphael with his tongue hanging out sadistically. Raphael pulled the knife out of his hand and hurled it down the stairs behind him, then punched Bananno square in the jaw. Bananno fell to the ground.

"Man, Bananno, you was a lot tougher when your baby brother was hangin' witchya."

"Oh but my brother *is* with me, raisin. He's always with me."

Raphael looked suspiciously at the elder Bananno Brother. "All that Juice musta got you way past ripe ya sumbitch."

Bananno reached into his pocket and pulled out a small syringe filled with yellow liquid. "Oh, he's right here. Little Bert is always with me, now and forever."

Raphael stared at the syringe in horror. "You tellin' me...you Juiced your own brotha?!"

Bananno smiled. "C.I.T.R.U.S. said they only needed one man in charge of the Juice Factory, so I decided to take the initiative. Bert understands, he's told me so every time."

He injected himself, closing his eyes and writhing in ecstasy. Raphael picked up his Glockamole. "Call me a saint, kid, 'cause I about to do you a favor."

Raphael, with a stern look, fired a single gooey bullet at Bananno, who screamed as his arm flew off and splattered across the floor.

“But I ain’t gonna kill ya, ya brat. You already dead as they come, ain’t nothin’ left for you ya junkie sucka.”

Raphael helped the cherry woman to her feet and moved towards the rest of the prisoners. The elder Bananno was on his knees in front of the Jelly Vat, the vial of his brother’s essence shattered in front of him. The sick grin on Bananno’s face was completely wiped clean. All that remained was a horrified face on the verge of tears.

“W-why? Why did he kill you, brother? My dear brother...look what he’s done to you.”

With his remaining arm Bananno gathered up the broken shards of the syringe, coated in yellow liquid, and held them close to his chest.

“it’s okay, brother. I know what we can do. I know how we can fix all of this...”

Bananno stood up and slowly moved towards the hole. “Look at the beautiful colors, brother. There’s lots of them. Do you see? There’s some purple and red and green. Oh...it’s missing something..”

He smiled his childish smile one final time as he let his body fall into the vat.

Raphael untied the imprisoned fruits. “Melanie, baby, we gonna need a lotta help. These fruits is gonna need a nice place to stay and some real special treatment. Can ya dig it?”

The young cherry woman covered herself with her arms and looked up to Raphael. “I really thought he was going to kill me. Thank you so much.”

She began to sob as she held onto Raphael’s leg. Raphael looked at the gun in his holster and realized just how close he had come to losing all of these innocent lives. “Y’all good, baby, but I got one favor to ask of a sweet thing like y’all.”

The young cherry looked sheepish. “But I’ve only just met you, mister...we could at least go out first.”

Raphael chuckled. “Nah baby, I ain’t lookin to get my grapes off till later tonight. Just wanted to know if you saw a raisin with some buck teeth and a funky lookin’ head.”

“Fraid not mister. I didn’t see him with the rest of us.”

Raphael patted her on the head. “That’s okay, baby, you just cover up them naughty bits and I’ll get someone to help y’all out real quick like, ya feel me?”

Raphael walked around the room looking for clues as to where his final brother could be. Leaving the prisoners in the main room, Raphael wandered into Bananno’s office, but still saw no sign of his brother. The office was a mess, nothing but empty Juice vials and half empty liquor bottles. Raphael waddled towards Bananno’s desk and amidst the litter and cigarette butts, there was a fresh looking envelope with “RAISIN” written on the front. Raphael opened it and read the letter inside.

“Dearest raisin, I thought we had been having so much fun in our little game that we should prolong our joy. I’ve taken your final brethren up into the highest clouds. I’m sure your silly little friends at CALRAB will be able to help you get here.”

Raphael crumpled the note in his hands. “Goddamn you, Jucius. I’m comin’ for you next.”

Chapter 13

A Lime to Kill

“Well, Agent Purple, that’s everyone. All of Bananno’s prisoners have been set up in the medical bay. you’re lucky you showed up when you did, there’s no telling how many he would have killed.” Paula wrapped the stab wound on Raphael’s hand as she looked towards the door. “Mel’s scanning the clouds now trying to find Jucius. Just relax for a little bit okay?”

Raphael leaned back in his chair. It had been a long day, and as long as he could remain strong in the face of adversity he might be able to get his family back. “Y’know, kid, I never thought it’d feel so damn good havin’ a hole in my hand ’til today.”

Paula chuckled. “You’ve saved a lot of people. Just try not to let those Juice slingers get you down. I can tell you firsthand I had no idea what it really was when I was helping manufacture it.”

She sat down at the table across from Raphael and she placed her hands under her chin.

“If you hadn’t met me that day I might have ended up in that vat too. Don’t discredit yourself for what you can’t do anymore, Agent Purple. Please. For your sake, and for theirs.”

She gestured towards the medical bay, housing not only the kidnapped fruits, but three of Raphael’s four brothers. Raphael smiled as he stood up and stretched. “Thanks for the wrap kid, but I gotta finish my mission. I really owe ya one, li’l lady, you neva forget it, y’dig?”

Paula smiled as Raphael waddled out of the room.

In the teleportation bay he noticed an additional tube had been installed with the word “Clouds” hanging above it. Raphael saw Melanie and Chief Lemon sitting in the room, the table between them covered in folders. Melanie smiled to see Raphael in better shape than he’d been at the Factory.

“Agent Purple, it’s good to see...”

Chief Lemon stepped forward. “Raisin, we both know how we feel about each other. We’re men of many differences, but I got one thing you better know before you finish this mission.”

The Chief’s gruff tone almost seemed subdued. He grabbed a single folder from the pile on the table.

“When you mentioned seeing a bunch of grapes in the sky I took a look at this Jucius Caesar. Nobody here had heard of him involved in any crime before so I wanted to find out what this asshole’s deal is. He’s actually some dignitary from Greece.”

Raphael nodded. “I gotcha, Chief. But what’s that mean for me?”

Lemon tossed the folder back onto the table, “What it means is if you kill this guy, we could have an international incident on our hands. You’ve managed not to stir the pot so far, but if this guy goes under and you’re to blame, we could be in some serious shit.”

Raphael gave him a thumbs up. The Chief stood up to walk away, but before leaving he turned back.

“Y’know one difference between you and me, raisin?”

“Wazat Chief?”

Lance chuckled for what seemed like the first time in a decade, “I woulda taken that cherry up on her offer for a date.”

Raphael smiled and laughed. “Damn, Chief, didn’t know you had it in ya.” Lance smirked back at Raphael as he left.

“Are you feeling ready to finish this, Agent Purple?”

Raphael cracked his knuckles. “I been ready since the day my daddy named me, baby.”

Melanie turned the seven knobs on the Clouds tube as she said, “We were able to pinpoint exactly where this Jucius guy is. If he really is the head of C.I.T.R.U.S. we might be able to pull them up by the roots by bringing him in.”

“Even if we ain’t stop ’em today, I ain’t gonna let ’em have they way anymore. Can ya dig it?”

The tube began to glow and shine as Raphael adjusted his belt and stepped inside. He held his fist out to Melanie.

“When I get back, baby...you got a front row ticket to the show the boys and I is doin’. After that, though, I think I owe you a dinner at my pad. Y’feel me?”

Melanie grinned as she gave him his fist bump. Raphael dissolved and teleported itself to a massive white palace in the Clouds.

* * *

The palace was marked C.I.T.R.U.S., and it looked like the Taj Mahal but at least eight times nicer. A large set of stone steps led to its massive doorway. There was a thick, leafy set of vines seeming to shake with the breeze. Raphael didn't have time to sightsee, though.

"Aight, Jucius, I been playin' yo silly ass games long enough! Where the hell you at?!"

The sound of a girlish cackling could be heard echoing throughout the clouds. "Oh, raisin...I'm everywhere now that you're in my domain!"

Raphael looked around. "Last man try to give me a damn riddle got his damn nose shot off so I'd say you best quit playin' round!"

The rustling leaves soon shook again as Jucius descended, suspended in the air by an enormous vine from the back of his head. Raphael aimed his gun at the cackling grape man.

"You best stop gigglin', little man, 'bout to put you out for good!"

Raphael started to pull the trigger, but Lance's words echoed in his mind. Just before firing on Jucius, Raphael turned his gun to the side. The bullet clattered against the leaves. Raphael pursed his lips and closed his eyes tight as the fluid drained from his body.

"Goddamn, that ain't ever gonna stop feelin' good."

"What's the matter, little raisin? Don't you want to play any longer?" Jucius held his hands to the air as four spears fell from the leaves. Raphael dove out of the way as they passed through the clouds and continued to fall. He looked up to Jucius with a sneer.

"Give it up, Jucius! Your boys are all done for and you the only one left! Come down quick and I'll make sure they go easy on ya!"

Jucius simply cackled again. "Those useless pawns mean nothing! So long as someone wants money and power and I'm there to offer it, C.I.T.R.U.S. will never be drained from the world!"

Raphael steadied his gun in the air again. "Besides, we have exactly what we aimed for from the beginning. Juice from each of your brothers and now...we have the lead singer of the California Raisins!"

"The hell you plan on doin' with me, ugly?"

“*Ohohoho*, my dear raisin. You’ll be our captive for life! We’ll drain you of your blood and market it to the highest bidder. Who wouldn’t want to get a rush off of the blood of the greatest band on Earth’s frontman?!”

Raphael grew furious. “Ain’t gonna happen. I’m too sour for some Juice junkie!”

Jucius looked down at the young raisin. “You haven’t a choice in the matter, dear boy. you’re going to make us billions on the Juice market!”

Raphael aimed his gun towards Jucius. “Aight, ya punk, we done playin’ nice!” He closed one eye and shot a gooey bullet right past Jucius’s smirking face and through the vine from which he hung.

Jucius’s eyes turned to panic as his vine snapped and dropped him down towards the C.I.T.R.U.S. palace. Raphael ran to apprehend the fiendish grape man, but a loud and unmistakable splat rang through the air.

“No, goddamnit. *No!* Please don’t be...”

Raphael found Jucius lying on his back on the stone steps to the palace, his head having landed on the steps. He was bleeding profusely.

Raphael lifted the bleeding Jucius gently to look at the damage to the back of his head. “Son of a bitch, you ain’t dead yet. You *can’t* die y’hear?!”

Jucius looked at Raphael weakly, “Oho...hoho...you poor child. Even you must realize when...when fate has made its call.”

“Was a damn accident! I can’t...this ain’t how it’s sposed to be!”

Jucius looked sympathetically towards the rockin’ raisin. “Worry...worry not boy. This is how...the game is to be played.”

Raphael pounded his fist on the steps. “Takin’ down the bigfig a’ C.I.T.R.U.S. and this is how it goes? Goddamnit!”

“Dear boy...what makes you believe...”

Jucius coughed up a spurt of green blood, then continued.

“...believe that I...I was in charge of C.I.T.R.U.S.?”

“But...you was takin’ out all them operatives. You was actin’ like the big cheese. If you ain’t in charge, then who is?”

“I am, Raphael,” came a brooding voice from the palace.

Jucius smiled as he looked towards the entrance. "I'm...sorry I failed...m-master."

Raphael recognized the voice, but where had he heard it before?

"Get out here! I ain't got time to mess around!"

An enormous presence emerged from the palace doorway. Raphael's face turned to complete disbelief. It was a massive man, towering over both Raphael and Jucius, standing about 5'8". The man had a receding hairline, a broad nose, and a smirking grin underneath his dark soulless eyes.

This cold gaze was projected from a face blacker than the night sky, staring intensely at Raphael. Rumors had spread about this man's passing long ago, but little did they realize that he had only retreated to the underground to begin a life of crime with fruit.

Behind those cold dead eyes was the unmistakable visage of the world's greatest entertainer, Al Jolson.

"D...*Daddy?*" Raphael gasped.

Chapter 14

The Jazzy Singer vs. The Jizz Slinger

Raphael hadn't seen him since that fateful day he abandoned his sons. His father was a cold and brutal man, but to involve himself in the drug trade? "Daddy...what the hell you doin?!"

"Raphael, you always were a failure of a son. You should be honored we at C.I.T.R.U.S. are willing to make something out of you."

Had his father been plotting something so insidious all those years ago? The dying Jucius tugged lightly on Jolson's pant leg.

"M...master...I meant to serve this raisin to you on a...s...silver platter."

Jolson looked down at him with disgust. "I knew trusting a filthy pile of grapes was a terrible idea. you're as worthless as the rest of them were!"

Jucius looked up to his master with pain in his eyes. "Master Jolson please...you know I would do anything for you..."

The man sneered as he brought his foot up. "Then die for me, Jucius!"

Al Jolson stomped down on the great Jucius Caesar's head, splattering green blood all over the steps.

"You killed 'em, dad! You killed your own guy! What the hell's the mattuh with you?!"

Jolson scraped the grape's blood from his soft shoe onto the stone steps. "I had to kill him, son, because he was worthless. Just like you always have been. You and your horrible brothers."

Raphael held his Glockamole tight and his hand shook with fury. "Ain't nobody worthless! Not a goddamn man alive! You just sittin' up here in the clouds thinkin' you king of the world, but you don't know 'bout anybody out there! You just a damn fool!!!"

Jolson scoffed. "All you worthless raisins are just as bad as the rest of the peasants polluting the cities. This country should be thanking me for grinding you up into something more valuable."

Raphael grew more and more furious with each word that came off of his father's lips. "Everybody on Earth belongs here, old man! We all got a point! A jaded old mothafucka like you don't see that, and that's why you all alone!"

Jolson chuckled an elegant laugh. "Such meaningless words, from a meaningless little boy."

The massive man walked towards his former son, and launched a ferocious kick to Raphael's stomach. Raphael slid back across the clouds as he tried to gain his composure. "You got no soul old man...I thought there was an ounce a good in you...all your sons tried to look like you. We went into music cause a you....*and you dropped us in the trash like we was rotten, daddy!*"

Raphael screamed out, his voice carrying through the clouds. Jolson's solemn demeanor wasn't shaken. "I'm a man of many talents, Raphael. Being able to forget the mistakes of my past is one of them."

"Mistake. you're wrong again, daddy man. I ain't no mistake. Not even *close!*"

Raphael slammed his fists into the clouds, launching himself into the sky above, and fired a single gooey bullet at Jolson. As the bullet zipped through the air Jolson dodged it expertly. "Sorry, son, you'll have to do better than that."

Raphael landed on the clouds, face first. "You really got a lotta nerve, daddy. You know how many lives you ruined doin' whatchyou been doin'?"

Jolson continued his march forward. "I'm a businessman, Raphael, and I'm cleaning up the streets and proving a much needed resource, all in one fell swoop."

Raphael charged at his father and was punched back down onto the clouds. He could feel the sting of his father's rings in his gut.

The man standing before him looked nothing like the father who taught him how to walk, who taught him how a microphone worked. This was supposed to be the man who showed him everything. Now he was nothing more than a drug-dealing murderer. "Y'know daddy...I think we both made a big mistake we tryin' to fix today."

Jolson looked at his firstborn. "Do tell, Raphael. What could someone as pathetic as you aim to fix?"

Raphael stood strong, blood trickling from his enormous lips. "My mistake was thinkin' I ever shoulda missed you after you left. You nothin' but a bottom feedin' lowlife *sucka!*"

"You've got a death wish speaking to me that way, boy."

Jolson walked towards his son with his fists raised.

"I think it's high time I finally strangle the life out of you."

Raphael backed away from his approaching father, and looked around.

"There's no escape, Raphael. Your life is over."

Raphael pulled the hammer back on his gun and fired another gooey bullet at his father. Jolson dove out of the way and looked towards his son, only to no longer see him there. As he looked around he was suddenly struck in the arm by a purple bullet from above.

Al Jolson grabbed his arm as it leaked red blood. Raphael was hanging from the vines above. "You ain't as bright as you think, are ya daddy?"

Al became furious. "Have you ever tried singing 'Mammy' one-handed?! I'll kill you and drink your juice myself!!"

Raphael swung from vine to vine while looking for the perfect angle on Jolson. Al bounced himself into the vines after him, using his good arm to grab onto a vine in front of Raphael. He kicked his son back down to the clouds below.

His father landed atop him, foot on his throat. Raphael gasped for breath as the bloody Jolson growled, "You won't ruin my life anymore, Raphael! After you're gone I'll finish off the rest of my horrible spawn!!"

Raphael tried to lift his arms as his father continued grinding his foot into his throat.

"Die, you pathetic raisin!!" Suddenly, a purple bullet shot right through Jolson's groin, causing the towering performer to let off his foot and fall to the ground, clutching his genitals in pain. Raphael stood up panting, holding his smoking Glockamole.

"No matter what happens, daddy...you ain't *neva* havin' no kids again!"

Jolson rolled on the ground writhing in pain. "*You fucking raisin! How dare you!*"

"I was wrong. You ain't my daddy no more. See ya...Al."

Jolson punched at Raphael in futility, and a gooey purple bullet forced its way through his forehead. There was no longer any singing from him.

He let go of his father's cold dead body as it began to sink through the clouds. Raphael shed no tears for this monster, for he'd dug his own grave the moment he abandoned the California Raisins.

An unmistakable figure slowly hobbled its way out of the C.I.T.R.U.S. palace. "Mah god...he didn't hurt you did he?!"

"I be obee-kabee, Raphee," said Cliff Raisin.

Raphael ran to his baby brother and hugged him tight. "Bro, I was startin' to get worried."

The two brothers embraced. He had finally done it. He was able to topple C.I.T.R.U.S. with nothing more than his own two hands, and also his testicles.

The world he'd seen this morning finally seemed like it was at peace. As the brothers held each other, Raphael's Communicator rang out. It was Melanie's signal.

"What's up, baby? I got it all taken care of."

"Agent Purple, we need you to get back to base as soon as possible! it's an emergency!"

Raphael looked over to the corpse of Jucius Caesar smeared all across the steps of the C.I.T.R.U.S. palace. "I get the feelin' some buddies a' yours ain't too happy, is they?"

The naïve young Cliff looked scared as he held his brother close. The two raisins prepared to depart from the clouds and back into CALRAB to face the music.

Chapter 15

Sweet Sweetlemon's Badasssss Song

Raphael and Cliff were teleported into the teleportation bay where Paula, Melanie, and Chief Lemon were waiting for them. Paula took Cliff Raisin by the hand and led him away. “Agent Purple...stay strong.”

Lance and Melanie sat at the table.

“Raisin...I saw what happened. I know what you can tell 'em...but he's still dead.” Though Lemon seemed stern as always, his tone was more mournful than before.

Melanie looked to the table, she was unable to even look Raphael in the eye. “The Council is demanding you meet with them, Agent Purple. They said you can tell your story but...you know how they decide their cases.”

Raphael looked to the ground. “If I neva see either a you two again, I just wanna say thanks for everythin'. Can ya dig it?”

Chief Lemon nodded, his face remaining stone cold.

Raphael waddled down the hallway. He knew exactly what was waiting for him with the high council. No matter what happened, he'd still saved his brothers and brought down C.I.T.R.U.S. Maybe that was enough. He'd had a good run, but there was one thing on his mind.

I never got to take Melanie out on the town, show her the world the way a raisin sees it...

* * *

Raphael stood at the podium, his hands clasped together. The Prosecution Wing of CALRAB was one he hadn't been in for several years, but from the looks of everything this would be the last time.

Above him sat three elderly blue fruit in powdered wigs, “The Council of Elderberries now comes to order!” one said, pounding the gavel in front of him.

“Raphael Raisin, Codename: Agent Purple. You have been charged with the murder of the Grecian dignitary known as Jucius Caesar. Regardless of your service with CALRAB in the past, such actions are punishable as high treason. If you wish to offer any testimony in your defense, now would be the time.”

Raphael looked to the Council. “Look all y’all, I just wanna say no matta what happened...I’m sorry. I seen some real bad shit today, y’dig? A damn barrel spewin’ shit out his nose, and a damn foot machine stompin’ all around. There was people gettin’ *Juiced*, ya honors! I saw some a the sickest shit I ever seen in my goddamn life, dog. I ain’t neva gonna be the same man again, but I’d do it again every goddamn day a my life if it meant one less kid on the street was gettin’ hooked.”

The Council nodded in approval. “Well said, young raisin. In any other case such noble words would prove your innocence. However, I’m afraid we cannot let the Greek government see us as condoning terrorist actions against their foreign dignitaries. Agent Purple, you have left us with no other verdict except gui...”

“Wait!” a voice shouted out. “As far as I’m concerned there’s still time to present evidence, ain’t there?”

The Council looked towards the voice from the back of the room, as did Raphael. “Yes, Chief Lemon. If you wish to present evidence in this young man’s case you still have a few moments to do so.”

Chief Lemon walked past Raphael. “Yo chief, whatchyou tryin’ a’ do here?” Raphael whispered.

Lance didn’t say a thing and instead pulled out a silver Comprunicator from his pocket. “Allow me to submit to the court evidence of the true murderer of Jucius Caesar.”

Lance keyed in a code on his Comprunicator and it began to play some kind of vocal recordings.

“Master Jolson please...you know I would do anything for you...”

“Then die for me, Jucius!!”

The stomp was ear-shattering over the Comprunicator.

“You killed ’em dad! You killed your own guy!”

Lance shut off the Comprunicator. “Do you think this is enough evidence, boys?”

The Council of three turned to each other and silently discussed the situation. The head chairman of the Elderberries turned to Lance. "Very well, we have reached our final verdict. We declare the defendant Raphael Raisin of the California Raisins...*not guilty!*"

The Elderberry chief pounded his gavel while Raphael stood completely astounded.

"You are free to go, Agent Purple. Your services are much appreciated."

Raphael walked dumbfounded from the courtroom. He saw the stoic Chief standing in the hallway, taking a drag from a cigarette as per usual.

"Chief I...I dunno what to say."

Lance turned away from Raphael. "What can I say, kid. You reminded me of someone out there. But now ya owe me one, raisin." Lance began to walk down the hall back to his office. Raphael called out to him.

"I can see if that cherry'd be cool goin' out witcha if y'want."

Lance turned back and laughed. "Nah...no matter what happened, I'm still a married man."

Raphael shot the Chief a gooey thumbs up, and Lance returned the gesture with a quick smile.

Chapter 16

A California Raisin in the Sun

One week after the C.I.T.R.U.S. incident, the Mandarin Square Garden stadium had a completely packed house. Reginald, Ronald, Ricky, and Cliff were preparing their instruments while Raphael hummed a soulful tune into an unplugged microphone.

Raphael oiled up his wrinkles and continued humming. He could hear the screaming fans outside the curtains, and he knew he and the boys couldn't disappoint them tonight.

He walked past his brothers dressing rooms and saw the most important men in his life preparing for the show. Reginald was tapping on the side of his drum kit while talking on the phone with someone.

"Yea, Elton, thanks for talkin' with me. I just thought I needed to start usin' again before I went on stage. Thanks, bruh."

As Raphael walked past Ricky's room he could see his brother squeezing toothpaste onto his toothbrush. Ricky sprayed a touch of water onto it and then quickly turned the faucet off. He brushed his teeth as he tuned his guitar.

Ronald's room seemed to have a little noise behind the closed door. Raphael placed his ear to the door and heard a conversation behind it. "Yeah, baby, I write all the songs *and* play the bass. I'm pretty much the *raisin* we a success. Haw haw haw!"

Raphael smiled and rolled his eyes as he walked to Cliff's dressing room. Cliff appeared to be gingerly practicing his electric triangle while smiling. He hugged a stuffed animal Raphael and Ricky had bought him for his last birthday.

He returned to his own dressing room and looked in the mirror. It had been a while, but what he saw in the mirror finally felt like more than a Hollywood raisin. Raphael was a California raisin, and he would never forget what that meant.

The noise from the crowd felt like it was elevating the entire building into the sky. Cheers were heard from every single seat in the house. Nearly 20,000 adoring fans were chanting, “RAISINS! RAISINS! RAISINS!”

The front row housed the Applerigine tribe, a handful of cheering beach teens, and, of course, Melanie sat right in the middle.

The four raisins on instruments walked out one by one, all of them to thunderous applause. However the truly massive reaction was saved for Raphael. As he walked out, the entire auditorium erupted in screams and cheers.

Raphael looked down at Melanie and gave her a wink before grabbing the microphone.

“Y’ALL READY TO ROCK AND ROLL TONIGHT?!”

The cheers could be heard from another planet. Raphael tapped his sneaker to the floor and began to sing one of the California Raisins’ biggest hits, a song someone else wrote that they did a cover of.

The audience went crazy.

Raphael looked out at the fans that night. He saw every single one of them as someone different. Each one of them had their own story to be told, and they all had something unique that they brought to the world. These men and women all had but one thing in common: they loved the rock and roll stylings of the California Raisins. However, he wouldn’t be able to hear the stories of these adoring fans; Raphael had an important date with a beautiful woman that night, and hers was the story he most wanted to hear.



LINUS SPACEHEAD'S COSMIC CRUSADE

by J. Paul Roe

Linus could feel Earth's lonely sun shine on his face and the crunchy prickle of foliage on his back. He was lying in an endless field of the bladed plant that covered the planet like green carpeting. Above him, winged animals frolicked in the sky before diving away after some unseen prey. Linus sat up with a smile and ripped a handful of the plant-carpeting from the ground. When he threw it in the air above him, the pieces floated down like the showers of shredded paper that would rain down on the parades back home on Linoleum.

Parades like the one that they'll have for me when I get back!

Linus laughed at the thought of returning to his planet. He had been to Earth before, the first of his people to do so, but he had made the mistake of returning without proof of his find. This time around he would go home with pictures of Earth in hand, and he would finally get to shove his discovery in the faces of those who mocked him. His entire planet took him for a liar or a nut when he had told them about his discovery of Earth the first time, so there were a lot of mocking faces. The Linolean jumped to his feet at the sudden sound of running water behind him. He turned and saw a long ribbon of blue cutting through the field. He had seen from space how much of Earth was covered with surface water; not just ribbons like this one, but huge oceans of it. It was a spectacular planet, teeming with all sorts of life, and it made the drab, barren planet of Linoleum look like a rock.

Linus ran toward the water, green carpeting crunching under his feet. He hadn't smiled and laughed that way in years. The sheer wonder of the planet was overwhelming and in the midst of the alien animals and plants, he felt free of all the troubles of home. When he reached the blue ribbon, he fell to his knees and reached out to touch the water.

But something was wrong. His vision blurred, and the animal sounds of chirping and clucking dulled. His green-and-blue discovery began to fade, and he could feel Earth slipping away all around him.

Not again! No, please! I'm not ready to leave!

"Hey, dirt bag, you don't belong here." The rough voice came from nowhere, everywhere.

Linus woke up.

He rubbed his eyes and peeled himself from the filthy ground behind the balloon stand. As the waking world came into focus, he spotted a small yellow river slowly encroaching toward him. One of Cape Carnival's many clowns was standing over him, providing the flow. With clown-pud in hand, he was firing a stream of urine against the wall and an equally intense stream of dirty looks at Linus.

"I'm serious, dude. You need to move along before I call the boss," the clown said, shaking off.

Linus slowly pulled himself to his feet, narrowly avoiding the expanding yellow puddle.

"You douche," Linus rasped. "You didn't have to piss on me."

"Got you to move, didn't it?"

The clown zipped up and slipped back into the crowded lanes of the carnival midway without sparing a second look at Linus, who was busy brushing the dirt from his pants.

Such mornings were not uncommon. In fact, Linus was pretty sure he had been woken up by a "Big Top shower" before. It was one of the many joys of taking up residence in Linoleum's most obscenely large circus. The carnival master had been looking the other way for ages, allowing Linus to squat in the behind-the-scenes shadows of the grounds. In return, Linus gave the clowns someone to mock and throw pies at during operating hours.

Discovering Earth should have made me a celebrity, but it made me the fool of Linoleum.

And what a grand fool Linus had become. After fighting for years to have his discovery taken seriously, all of his efforts had managed to secure only a single grant in the laughable sum of one-thousand Lino dollars. It would have taken five times that amount just to get his spacecar back into orbit. With no prospects and too-little cash, Linus had fallen into a cycle of depression and self-abuse. The meager grant for scientific discovery was put to use, but Linus was unable to relocate Earth at the bottom of any hardspirit bottles, no matter how many he emptied. When the Linoleum News Service reported that Linus had become a stumbling drunk, all hope of gaining favor from the scientific community was forever lost.

And here I am now. Getting pissed on by clowns, and doing odd-jobs at a carnival.

Linus pushed his way from between the wood-plank stalls and into the crowded midway. A few of the carnival-goers in the thrall recognized his face from the news and sniggered, pointing their fingers, but Linus's time in the spotlight had faded years ago. He found it becoming more common for others to just step aside to avoid him entirely.

The smell of Snake Cakes and meat-dogs wafted through the crowd as Linus pushed through. His stomach roared, but he didn't look toward the food stalls. As if driven by instincts more powerful than hunger, his gaze snapped to the booth that housed the Luk-E-Day gambling machine.

Most of the cash that Linus would earn by doing odd jobs he would feed into the Luk-E-Day Machine. There had been a long-standing legend that the machine would pay out a jackpot to anyone who was gambling their last Lino. He had put the legend to the test a hundred times over, each time proving it to be so much crap.

The only way I'm gonna get a payout from that machine is if I cut the throat of the guy who comes to collect all of my Lino out of it.

Linus spat on the dirt of the midway lane, barely missing the foot of some faceless guest. Even if he had the courage to kill someone, he didn't have the knife. As he rounded the corner on the Luv Hut ride, he cursed himself for ever returning to this dull, gray planet.

"Any work today, Mak?" Linus asked the scruffy Linolean in charge of the Luv Hut.

He gave Linus a quick sideways glance before taking his time to reply. "I don't see no mop," he drawled through a crooked-toothed grin, "so unless you wanna use them rags you a-wearin' to clean up the floor, you better find one."

Linus sighed. Mak never wanted to clean the floor of the ride, so it was always a safe bet that Linus could make a Lino by taking up the task. Unfortunately, some jackass or another would always run off with the mop and forget to bring it back, leaving it to Linus to track it down.

The great space explorer begins his quest to find Mak's spooge mop.

Linus once dreamed of fame. He used to imagine they'd make teleshow about his grand adventures and write epic electrobooks about his life. But no one would want to read about his life now, although his adventures in collecting illicit sexual partners might make for a good late-night teleshow.

Linus trudged his way to the back of the Spin-A-Wheel game's stall and kicked the door open. A few stuffed rhinocorn toys fell from their pile in the corner of the tiny back room.

"Linus! You break my door, I'll break your neck!" a voice called from the front of the booth. It sounded like Zed. Linus couldn't see the carny, but he saw an eager young Linolean stepping up to take his chances on the wheel of prizes.

"Blow me," Linus called back, kicking a stuffed doll across the dirty floor.

A woman gasped in front of the booth and Linus looked up at her. She was covering the young boy's ears and scowling furiously until she saw Linus's face. Her scowl turned neutral and she quietly stepped into the moving crowd with the boy in tow.

I'm not even worth hating any more.

"C'mon, man!" Zed called again from the front of the stall. "You wanna get me fired? Watch your mouth!"

Linus was busying himself among the piles of prizes, pushing them aside by the armful in search for the mop.

"They won't fire you," he muttered, "no one else would do this shitty job."

"What are you doin', Linus? you're making a freakin' mess back here."

Linus tossed a bag of plastic whistles over his shoulder.

"Looking for Mak's mop."

"you're lookin' for a spooge mop and you call my job crappy?" the carny laughed.

Linus gave up his search and turned to the lanky teenager.

"At least I can leave this booth," he said, "which becomes important when someone like me takes a big dump on the floor before he leaves. it's pretty hot back here and there's not much of a breeze, if you catch my meaning."

The carny shook his head in disgust as Linus made his exit. He hadn't found the mop among the crumpled food wrappers and stuffed toys, but he had found something better.

Much better.

Linus made his way toward the Luk-E-Day machine, smiling as he patted the knife-shaped bulge in his back pocket.

Daydreaming was all Linus had. He would sit for hours and stare at the pale Linolean sky and imagine a bright yellow sun and wispy white pillows adrift in the endless sea of blue. The sky of Earth.

Sometimes when he lost himself deeply enough in the fantasy, he could smell the colorful plants and hear the chittering of the native Earth animal life.

Linus had been sitting beside the incinerator chute for a few hours, and the smells of burning food wrappers and Sugarblast bottles didn't allow for deep daydreaming. He tried to ignore the smoky, toxic odors and the pitiful stares of passing carnival-goers. The chute had a perfect view of the Luk-E-Day machine.

This is where I turn it around. There has to be enough Lino in that machine to get a fresh start...maybe even enough to get back into space. Anything would be better than this hellhole.

Linus imagined leaving Cape Carnival for good. That thought alone was enough to wake a feeling of hope inside of him that hadn't been seen in years. All he had to do was kill the unlucky wad who came to collect the take from the gambling machine.

And then what? Run? Hide?

Linus knew that it wouldn't take a scientist to figure out that he was the murderer once they realized he was gone. After all, he hadn't set foot outside the carnival grounds in nearly a decade.

The thought of spending the rest of his life on the run didn't sit easily with him, but he fought it back by imagining how he would spend a sackful of Lino.

The hours had gone by slowly beside the chute, but night finally crept in and washed over the stalls and banners of the midway. The game booths cast their dim interior lights onto the thoroughfare, covered in the day's discarded paper plates and crumpled wrappings. Above it all the flashing lights of the coasters and rides twirled and whirled.

Linus took a bite from a half-eaten twisty-bread that he had saved from burning in the incinerator. His eyes didn't stray from the Luk-E-Day machine as he methodically chewed the salty leftover.

As he swallowed the final mouthful and licked the grease from his fingers, a very large Linolean stepped out of the shadows across the lane and approached the gambling machine.

This has to be it. Damn...why did they have to send the biggest dude on the planet?

Linus stood and put his hand in his pocket, his fist clenching around the hilt of the knife that he'd found beneath the piles of stuffed toys. For hours he had watched carnival-goers feeding Lino into the Luk-E-Day machine with no payouts. Now he was about to claim the jackpot at the point of a blade.

He took the first step across the lane, and then halted, retreating back into the shadow of the incinerator chute. Another figure had emerged from the shadows between booths and was walking up to the gambling machine. Apparently the big guy had a partner.

Linus was cursing his luck and leaning to throw the knife into the incinerator chute when he heard a grunt from across the lane. When he turned back, the first carny had become a motionless shadow on the ground and the other one was nowhere to be seen. Linus dropped the knife back into his pocket and darted to the machine.

The large carny was definitely done for, face-down in the grime and still as a day-old meat-dog. Linus clenched his teeth. He wondered just how bad his luck had to be for him to come in second place in a robbery, but when a breeze pushed the gambling machine's service door open with a metallic creak, his eyes almost popped from his skull.

Maybe my luck has changed...he beat me to the killing part, but the idiot forgot the cash!

Linus quickly checked up and down the thoroughfare for witnesses before shoving handfuls of the Lino coins into his pockets.

Not a good idea to have a bunch of Lino on me when they find the body.

Linus spotted the remains of a decommissioned bumper car behind the Luk-E-Day booth and shoved the Lino into a hollow underneath the rusty hulk. After three trips, he had emptied the gambling machine and deposited a few thousand Lino into the hole. Just as the grinning Linus had finished kicking dirt over his stash, a woman's voice called from the other side of the booth.

"Hey, Durag is hurt! Run and get help!"

With a final stomp on the fresh dirt, Linus jogged through the alley and skidded to a stop next to the fallen carny.

"You, homeless guy!" shouted the woman kneeling over the body. "Did you do this to him?"

Linus began shaking his head.

"No way, hon," a deep voice came from behind him.

Linus turned just as the muscly Strongman stepped up beside him and put a meaty hand on his shoulder. Strongman's arms were carved like twisted ropes, bulging from years of lifting massive barbells for his fans.

"Durag is a hefty fellow," Strongman continued. "Poor Linus here couldn't have knocked him out...he's too scrawny."

The woman shot Strongman a fierce look before groaning in agreement. Linus' luck was changing for the better...his malnourished husk of a body had become his alibi.

"Now, perhaps Linus saw something of the real culprit," Strongman said, his grasp tightening on Linus's shoulder. "You were behind the booth, I assume?"

Linus coughed. Very few of the carnies treated him like a Linolean and not a piece of refuse, but Strongman was one of them. It irked him that he would have to lie to one of the only people who liked him.

"No...I was asleep. Her yelling woke me up."

Strongman let go of Linus's shoulder to scratch at his cleft chin.

"Hmm...so whoever walloped Durag did so quietly."

The woman began to sob softly over the body.

"Poor Durag...my poor baby," she whispered. "Some coward snuck up on you and..."

Her words drifted off just as another carny, Old Bebe, who ran the Faraday Wheel, ran up with a pair of Medicos.

"Clear off, miss. We have to check him," one of the jump-suited Medicos said, pushing the woman aside.

"Why?!" she gasped, "He's already dead, you jerk off!"

The Medico waved an instrument over Durag's body.

"Maybe...maybe not. Hey, Chud, he's got faint life signs. Wheel the meat slab over here."

Linus took advantage of the ensuing commotion and slipped back into the shadows. With a quick glance over his shoulder he saw the woman on her knees, smiling hopefully as the Medico worked on Durag. Strongman was still scratching his chin and watching on.

Linus found a quiet spot near the Whirl-N-Spew ride and settled in for the night, though he was too excited about his pile of Lino to sleep. He wasn't happy about having to leave his stash unguarded, but he couldn't risk being caught with the coins so soon after the attack.

This place will be crawling with marshals looking for the guy who beat Durag's head in.

Whoever it was, Linus hoped they would find him quick. The sooner the manhunt ended, the sooner he could dig up his Lino and be on his way. He pulled a scrap of tent cloth over himself and curled up under the platform that circled the ride.

With the rush of the experience wearing off, Linus began to consider the more curious aspects of the evening's events. Foremost in his mind was the question of why someone attacked Durag, but didn't take the Lino.

They must have seen me and panicked.

Then again, he couldn't imagine anyone being scared off by a haggard skeleton. He resolved to chalk it up to good fortune and let it ride.

Linus rolled onto his back and gazed at the pale twinkle of stars in the gray Linolean sky.

He began to wonder about the woman who found Durag on the ground. *She must have been his lover*, he thought. Cape Carnival was a big place, though, and he had never met her or the half-dead pile of meat that she had been crying over.

Linus smiled and closed his eyes, once again reveling in the good fortune of falling into the perfect crime. He wouldn't need to run or hide. In a few days he could dig up his Lino and start putting his life back together. As he drifted off into sleep, a voice echoed in his mind like the afterimage of a nova flash.

"Durag is a big fellow...Linus is too scrawny..."

"Why did you do it, Strongman?" Linus asked the massive Linolean.

Strongman ignored the question, continuing to pose and flex up on his pedestal. All around them, the crowd gawked and clapped.

"Strongman!" Linus yelled, but the show continued unabated.

The cleft-chinned man flipped up into a handstand and began cranking out pushups on his pedestal. The crowd cheered.

Linus wasn't sure how he had ended up standing among the shows on the Walk of Oddities, but he was sure that Strongman had done something awful.

What did he do? And why the hell am I the one calling him out for it?

Strongman had always been decent to Linus, and he couldn't puzzle out why he had a sudden need to accuse the man of...something.

Must have been one hell of a wrong-doing since I can't even remember what it was.

Strongman began juggling a trio of heavy-looking dumbbells. The crowd roared.

Linus rubbed his head and turned away. As he stepped through the crowd to make his exit, he heard the rumbling voice of Strongman calling after him.

"Durag was a hefty fellow!"

Linus looked back. Strongman was smiling beneath burning eyes as he chucked the dumbbells from hand to hand and over his head.

"It would take a mighty big man to break his skull."

Linus sat up, throwing the tent cloth aside. He was covered in sweat, the rolling beads cutting runnels through the dirt on his face. The morning suns had broken and a wave of heat was already washing over the carnival grounds.

Beyond the scaffolding of the catwalk that he had slept under, Linus could hear the bustle of the early crowd already in full swing.

It came as no surprise that the carnival was open for business despite the attempted murder. The boss wouldn't let his profits suffer just because a killer was on the loose in his park. In fact, when Linus popped out and stepped into the flow of the crowd, there was no sign that the events of the previous night had even happened.

That changed when he rounded the corner and spotted a group of marshals gathered near the Luck-E-Day booth. They numbered at least twenty, each of them muscly Linoleons in armor and carrying laser-shooters. They represented the kind of attention that Linus didn't want brought down on himself, so he casually turned into a different flow of patrons moving in the opposite direction.

A quick circuit around the grounds of Cape Carnival proved that things around the park were, in fact, far from normal. Armed guards were positioned at the entry and exit gates, and Linus spotted at least three sets of marshals escorting leashed smellhounds, their noses wrinkling furiously at the dirt.

For what? Do they even know who they're sniffing for?

Maybe they had a suspect, or maybe they were just trying to scare the killer (or would-be killer) into making a mistake. Either way, Linus

knew that he'd have to wait until the marshals cleared out before it would be safe to retrieve his Lino. He was about to give up hope and sink back into another clown-piss-drenched alley when a thought struck him.

Strongman did it!

Looking back on the dream, Linus realized how obvious the message had been.

Strongman was one of the only people in the park who had the sheer power to cave in the victim's enormous head. It would only be a matter of time before the marshals put that together, but Linus didn't want to wait. All he would have to do to speed them out of the way of his Lino was point out the criminal.

Not that they'd believe me. I'm the fool of the planet.

He would need to find someone credible to go to the marshals, but Linus didn't have any friends in the carnival, aside from the guy he was trying to get arrested.

He stood and pondered his options, the carnival-going crowd flowing around him. Then he saw her...the woman from that night, working a rigged ball-throwing game across the crowded lane.

Durag's girlfriend! Or whatever the hell she is. Perfect!

He didn't know her, and she didn't know him. If he was lucky, she didn't consider him the biggest scumbag on the planet, like most Linoleons did. It all depended on how much she had heard about his past. Either way, Linus didn't have a large selection to choose from, so he crossed the lane and made his approach.

"you're Linus, right?" she asked while keeping her eyes on a kid who was throwing balls at a stack of bottles. "You were there last night."

"Yeah, I was. Hey...I know you don't know me..."

"Oh," she grinned, "I know you. Who doesn't?"

Linus sighed and looked at his feet.

"it's okay, man. People care too much what everyone else thinks. Catch."

The woman tossed one of the hard white balls to Linus and he juggled it from hand to hand before finally gripping it.

He gave her a puzzled look while turning the smooth ball in his hands.

"Now, throw it at the bottles. Right here."

Linus sucked his teeth. He didn't have time for games. His redemption was waiting beneath a rusty bumper car.

"C'mon, throw it!"

He frowned at her and heaved the white ball at the bottles. The ball hit true, striking one of the bottles on the bottom row. The stack barely moved.

"See," the woman smiled mischievously, "we're all crooked around here. The games are rigged, the rides are falling apart, and most of the clowns shoot so much Candy in their arm they don't even have to wear makeup to look scary."

Linus chuckled. She had a point.

"So who the hell are we to judge you? Right? Now what did you want?"

Linus felt much better about choosing this woman. He didn't hesitate at all, even when he decided to lie to her face.

"it's about your boyfriend. I know who killed him."

She stopped watching the children throwing their balls and frowned at Linus.

"First of all, he's my husband," she sneered, "and second, he's not dead. He's in a coma."

"Hey, sorry!" Linus sneered back. "Do you want to know who did it or not?"

The woman blinked and looked into the distance for a moment before answering.

"Sure, Linus."

"It was Strongman."

"And what makes you say that? Did you see him?"

Linus shook his head, "No. But he's the only guy strong enough to put that big bastard in a coma. No offense."

"No...you're right. Durag is a big bastard. But it wasn't Strongman who hit him."

Linus felt his hopes draining away again. She wasn't shaping up to be a very cooperative straw man.

"Don't go around blaming him, either," she scowled, "Strongman is one of Durag's best friends, and we don't need rumors like that going

around the carnival. You of all Linoleons should know how that turns out.”

“Okay, okay,” Linus mumbled.

He turned and walked away.

That was pointless. It had to be Strongman, but she's too close to the problem to see it.

He had to find someone else. Maybe someone young and stupid, he thought, and immediately recalled the young carny that operated the Spin-A-Wheel game. Linus quickly turned on his heel and pushed through the crowd to pay Zed a visit.

The young carny wasn't too happy to see Linus, but that was the kind of reaction that he had grown accustomed to over the years. At least the Spin-A-Wheel game wasn't pulling any customers in, which gave Linus plenty of time to recount his story to the teenager.

“Look, kid, somebody has to go to the marshals with this. They won't listen to me.”

Zed had been staring at a pile of stuffed unbears the whole time Linus spoke. He wasn't reacting to a word of the accusation, but he wasn't saying no either. Finally, Zed looked at Linus and cleared his throat.

“So, you saw Strongman hit him? you're sure?”

“Yup. Saw the whole thing,” Linus said.

He wasn't making the mistake of being honest this time.

“Wow. I never trusted that guy. You know he does spaceroids?” the kid sighed. “I knew it wouldn't be long before he snapped.”

“Yeah,” Linus nodded, “he's a real menace. That's why you have to help me.”

“Look, bro, I believe you. But I can't go to the marshals without proof. If they don't arrest him and he finds out I tried to turn him in, he'll break me in half.”

Linus paused to think. Zed was already ninety-percent of the way to being a perfect straw man, and finding something that would pass as proof couldn't be hard.

“I'll be right back. Stay here and don't talk to anyone,” Linus said as he darted off.

He was at Strongman's trailer in minutes. The campground that served as employee housing was largely empty, with most of the residents busy at their tents and booths. After scanning up and down the rows of

trailers for roving marshal patrols, he kicked open the door of the shiny metal travel home and jumped inside.

Strongman's home was exactly as Linus expected. The counter in the tiny kitchen was covered in bottles of muscle-growth supplements and the walls were papered with anatomical drawings of muscle groups. It didn't take long for Linus to search the small dwelling thoroughly, finding no evidence of attempted murder.

The spacehole couldn't have just left a signed confession lying around?

Linus couldn't go back to Zed without proof, or he would be back at square one, so he pursued the only reasonable option. He snatched up one of Strongman's workout gloves and laid it in the kitchen sink. After drawing the knife that he'd stolen from Zed's booth, he cut into the palm of his hand and sprayed his lifeblood on the glove.

Linus dizzily lifted the bloody glove out of the sink and shoved it in his pocket. He grabbed a handful of Lino and a Telekey that he had found in the trailer, resolving that Strongman wouldn't need them on death row, and staggered out the door.

"You look like shit," Zed said as Linus walked up to the Spin-A-Wheel.

"You'd know. You eat enough of it," Linus replied, tossing the bloody glove at the carny.

"What the hell!?" Zed yelled.

Linus was feeling a bit faint, and it took him a minute to steady himself. The hand that he was hiding in his pocket was still oozing blood down his leg.

"it's proof. Strongman's glove with blood on it. There you go."

Zed picked the glove off the ground with two fingers and looked it over closely.

"How are they gonna know it's his glove?"

"They make him try it on and if it fits, he's guilty," Linus said, hoping the kid would believe it in spite of how utterly stupid that sounded.

Zed nodded, still looking at the glove. Linus almost felt bad when the kid stormed off with a determined look on his face.

Nothing like making an enemy out of a lunatic who can bench press a gazelephant. Sorry, Zed.

After he watched the young carny disappear into the crowd, Linus wandered over to the Walk of Oddities to wait for the marshals to swoop down. He flopped down on a bench and watched the Oddities working to draw customers into their shows.

The Fat Bearded Broad twirled around in her dress while the World's Smallest Linoleon rode around on a tiny one-wheel-o-cycle. Linus had seen their routines a thousand times before, and they held his interest even less now.

His eyes were quickly drawn to one thing: Strongman on his pedestal, juggling heavy weights and doing pushups for the crowd. It wouldn't be long before the real show would start.

An hour had gone by, and Linus was starting to worry. He knew that his newfound luck would have to run out eventually, but the plan to get rid of the marshals seemed too simple to fail.

He had stopped watching Strongman and was lost in daydreams of Earth when the marshals finally arrived.

The Walk of Oddities turned into a different type of carnival in an instant. Armored marshals with laser-shooters surrounded the panicked crowd while a dozen more pushed through it, clearing a path straight to Strongman's pedestal. All around him, Linus could hear women screaming, children crying and the barking of smell-hounds pulling at their leashes for a chance to chase down a criminal.

As he watched the marshals pull Strongman from his pedestal and work him over with their batons, Linus felt a twinge of guilt. He choked it back and resolved that he couldn't have been wrong about pointing the finger at Strongman.

He's a 'roided up maniac. Even if he didn't attack Durag, he would have killed someone eventually.

Before long the marshals escorted the bruised and bloody Strongman out of sight. The crowd dispersed, most of the carnival-goers returning to their fun as if they hadn't just witnessed a high-magnitude ass-beating.

Linus, still struggling with blood loss from donating to the investigation, decided to celebrate his success by curling up on the bench and thoroughly passing out.

When Linus woke, Cape Carnival was closed for the day and the moon floated yellow-gray in the night sky. He rolled off of the bench and stood, noting that his hand had stopped bleeding and that the nap had restored his well-being.

I could sure use a shot of Candy as a pick-me-up, though.

Linus shook his head at the thought. He was on the cusp of turning his life around; he couldn't fall into that trap again.

Let the clowns shoot up, he thought. He had a mythical planet to rediscover.

With a long-absent grin, Linus walked into the darkened lanes of the carnival and sought out his buried treasure.

Along the way, Linus borrowed a fresh refuse bag from one of the collection bins that had been changed out for the night. It was of the industrial variety, capable of holding its own against the toxic ingredients of discarded carnival food, and it would serve well for hauling away his Lino.

A few turns, and a few looks over his shoulder to check for sneaks following him, brought Linus to his rusty bumper car. In minutes, he transferred the Lino from the hole to his refuse sack, tying it up securely. He patted his pockets to check his inventory and confirmed that Strongman's Telekey was still tucked away beside his other items.

Linus was thrilled that he had found the Telekey. With that he would be able to take a teleporter directly out of Cape Carnival, thereby avoiding the exit gates and any sets of prying eyes. Although he did pass a few ambling carnies as he traveled to the teleporter pavilion, they stuck to custom and ignored him completely.

That used to piss me off. Now being a shadow is making my life so much easier.

The journey to the teleporter booth was uneventful, almost anticlimactic for Linus. He had been squatting at Cape Carnival for nearly ten years, and he had never really thought about leaving. Now that he was about to beam himself across the planet and never look back, he felt sad that his departure was going happen silently in the night. He doubted anyone would even notice he was gone.

Looking out of the booth, he took in the sight of the carnival for the last time. The banners were flapping, the tents billowing, the booths creaking in the breeze. The sound of carnies enjoying their after-hours free time faintly carried through the grounds, and the moon blanketed it all in dim, gray light.

Linus took a deep breath and slid Strongman's Telekey into the control panel.

"Detroitica," he said, and Cape Carnival was gone.

Linus's molecules were reassembled in the city of Detroitica an instant later.

He opened his eyes and saw the suns shining over the sprawling skyline of the urban center. Detroitica had been the last city that Linus visited before finally drifting to a stop at Cape Carnival. It was here that his spacecar rested in storage. It was also here that he had pawned his camera for a handful of Lino, with which he bought a night's worth of Candy, hardspirits and filthy, filthy women. What he hadn't spent the women helped themselves to before leaving him to his blackout and an eventual life of mopping up fluids in a carnival.

Linus stepped out of the teleporter booth, his sack of Lino jingling.

It was going to be different this time.

Wiping away the trickle of blood from his nose, a common side-effect of teleportation, he walked to the nearest bus stop and plotted a course to the Store-And-Pay warehouse.

He boarded a bus after a short wait and tried to ignore the stares of the other passengers, no doubt hard at work trying to figure out why a dirty bum was carrying a sack full of cash.

Who knows? Maybe they even recognize me. I hope not.

The bus rolled to a stop in front of the Store-And-Pay. Linus stepped off and made his way inside.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Spacehead," the clerk said, tapping away at a terminal. "Your spacecar is in bay 625. It seems you're in arrears on your rent, however..."

"How much?"

"Hmm.....245 Lino, I'm afraid," the clerk grinned.

Bastard thinks I'm broke.

"Here," Linus said, slamming his refuse bag on the counter.

The clerk counted out 245 coins with a disinterested expression and handed over a pass key.

"Oh, Mr. Spacehead," he added just as Linus reached the door. "I forgot to mention. There was a problem with your unit a few years ago. Some hoodlum broke in and helped himself to your spacecar..."

"What?" Linus yelled, his face red.

"Oh, your car is still there," the clerk grinned again, "but they made off with your Guidance Module."

“Well, that’s great! I can’t get it back into space without that. I want my 245 Lino back!”

“Sorry, Mr. Spacehead. Store-And-Pay isn’t responsible for any loss or damage for items in storage. I’m afraid you signed a waiver to that effect when you rented the unit.”

Linus frowned. “I suppose it doesn’t matter that I was strung out on Candy when I signed it.”

“I can’t say that it does, sir.”

“Didn’t think so. Well, thanks for your help. Rot in hell.”

Linus pushed through the door and left the clerk to his smartass grinning.

Twenty minutes of walking brought him to his storage unit. The door slid open with a rusty moan after a swipe of the passkey woke it from a decade of slumber.

Despite being screwed over by the storage company, Linus had to smile. He had counted his spacecar as an irrevocable loss years ago. Now it was sitting in front of him, the factory Nova Red paint gleaming in the sunlight.

He circled around the front of the vehicle slowly, running his fingers along the smooth lines, before pulling the door open and climbing inside. The ’car wouldn’t be able to link with an orbital rocket without the missing Guidance Module, but it would still be able to travel on the streets of the city.

Linus pressed his palm to the ignition panel and the ’car rumbled to life, the dashboard displays flickering and the flight coils heating up. The whining motors slowly lifted the ’car, and allowed it to hover a foot above the concrete floor.

Linus eased it out of the storage bay and onto the streets of Detroitica. It had been years since he’d been behind the stick, but in minutes the familiarity of the controls returned and Linus was cruising nimbly through traffic wearing a smile of satisfaction that had been as lost as his ’car had been for the last ten years.

His destination was a tech shop, where he hoped to buy a secondhand Guidance Module. With luck, the bag of Lino in the passenger seat would more than cover the cost.

And I still have to get my camera out of hock.

The city had changed since he’d last been in Detroitica. The buildings were mostly the same, but the stores and restaurants within

them had different owners and names. When Linus finally spotted a legitimate-looking tech shop, he went inside and emerged a few minutes later with a serviceable Guidance Module, and much lighter sack of Lino.

He was standing beside his spacecar in the tech shop parking lot when a stranger approached him from behind. Too lost in the reverie of his good fortune, Linus didn't see them coming or expect a club to knock him across the back of the head.

The world went dark for an instant and pain overwhelmed his crumbling body.

When he regained his footing and looked around, he spotted the stranger running down the street with his arm wrapped around Linus's new Guidance Module.

"Come back here, you asshole!" Linus yelled.

Buying another Guidance Module was out of the question, which made the mugging a matter of life and death for Linus. If he was going to turn his life around, this thug was going to have to die.

Linus jumped into his spacecar and fired up the motors, speeding out of the lot.

The mugger caught on too quickly when he looked over his shoulder and saw Linus's ride bearing down on him. He ducked into an alley and disappeared into the shadows. Linus cursed and decided that his best option was to circle the block and wait for the mugger to exit back onto the street.

After a couple of slow circuits his waiting paid off, and he caught the thug crossing into a large artificial nature park.

Linus jumped from his 'car in front of the iron fence and bolted after the bastard. His level of fitness was laughable after years of eating fried carnival poison, but he pumped his legs like a madman, all the while fighting the urge to collapse and die.

When he rounded a copse of green and pink bushes, he came upon the mugger, who had stopped beside a slimy green pond. The thug's face was hidden behind a bandana, and his eyes were darkened by a hood drawn low over his head.

"You shit," Linus wheezed. "Give me my module!"

"Sorry, man," the thug said through the bandana, "but I'm keeping it. And I'm gonna let this thing kill you."

Linus watched as the slimy green pond turned semi-solid and rose up from the ground, becoming a snarling, oozing beast that towered over him.

“Don’t think so,” Linus sneered, “I’ve got a better surprise.”

With a bit of exhausted fumbling, Linus pulled a small hand-cannon from his waistband and leveled it at the green beast. The cannon belched fire and the creature’s head exploded in a wave of slime. A second shot rang out before the beast had even finished sinking back into the pond. The thug lurched and fell to the dirt.

Linus walked over to the mugger and put his foot on the gaping wound that the hand-cannon had opened in his shoulder.

“You picked a bad day to fuck with me,” Linus said, bending to pull away the thug’s bandana.

Beneath the cloth, Zed was grimacing in pain. Tears streamed down his face.

“What the hell?” Linus gasped. “What are you doing, man?”

The teen was struggling to breathe through the pain of a devastating wound. Linus shifted his weight and dug his foot into the bleeding shoulder. Zed screamed.

“I asked you a question!”

“They...they found out I turned in Strongman...” he rasped. “They were gonna kill me...until I told them you set him up...”

Linus frowned. He hadn’t made a clean break after all, thanks to this skinny carnny.

“They told me...they’d let me go if I came after you...killed you...”

“Who told you that? Who sent you?”

“Marla...I can’t believe...you effing shot me...where did you get...a gun?”

“A Telekey wasn’t the only thing I found in Strongman’s trailer. Who’s Marla?”

The thug’s breathing was getting shallow and his face was turning pale.

“Are you going back to Earth, Linus? Is it...is it real?”

“it’s real.”

“Can you take...take me with you? Please...I don’t want...to die here...”

Linus couldn't help but feel sorry for the young carny, dying like a space-dog next to some slimy pond. In a way, it was his fault the kid ended up there.

"Yeah, Zed...I'll take you to Earth. it's beautiful there," Linus said, raising the hand-cannon to the boy's head. "We'll be there before you know it."

The boy smiled, his teeth red with blood, and Linus fired.

Years ago, Detroitica had been the perfect city for Linus to spend the last of his Lino on women and drugs. It was a city rife with crime and woefully lacking in law enforcement. That fact hadn't changed since Linus's last visit, and for this he was immensely grateful.

He was already back in his spacecar before he realized the potential folly of executing Zed in a public park, but soon he was on his way to the Mid Quarter District, and no sounds of marshal sirens were following him.

He breathed easily again, though he still wondered who Marla was, and why she wanted Zed to feed him to a slime pond.

His final stop before heading to the Launchport was a shop called Smile Pawn, the place where he had hocked his camera years ago. Linus remembered the Mid Quarter District being the seediest part of Detroitica, and as he navigated the streets his memories were well validated. The buildings were shabby, the roads unkempt and piled with garbage.

When he found Smile Pawn and parked along the curb, Linus was hardly surprised to see a marshal cruiser abandoned across the street, its white paint scorched by flames and peeled by time.

Eager to put Linoleum behind him, he snatched up his sack of Lino, ran through the door of the shop and hailed the pawnbroker. The old Linolean began searching for Linus's paperwork in a wall of file drawers, stopping from time to time to eye his customer warily.

"Ah, here we go," the old man said, finding the right card.

Just as he turned to place it on the counter, the shop's door flew open and someone rushed in, shooter-pistol in his fist. Linus clenched his teeth and slowly reached for his hand-cannon; the armed Linolean was wearing a long coat and a snow-slopes mask, but Linus was all but certain that he wasn't caught up in a common robbery. The timing was too perfect for it to be anything but another jackass out for his head.

"Don't even try it, dipshit," the masked goon said, pointing his shooter-pistol at Linus.

Linus raised his hands and cocked his head curiously. It was a woman behind the mask.

Maybe this is Marla...

“Keep your hands up. You! Get out from behind the counter. That’s right. Now both of you get downstairs and don’t do anything stupid.”

The woman followed them through a beaded curtain and down a flight of stairs. When they reached the bottom, Linus felt something heavy crash into the back of his head.

When he finally came around, Linus was curled up in a corner of the basement, unable to move his arms.

The room was dimly lit and it took a moment for the haze in his eyes to clear. He was facing a wall of boxes and shelves with his hands tied behind him, and he could hear a faint rhythmic grunting from some other part of the basement.

He slowly rolled to his other side and found the source of the sound, playing out horribly across the room.

The masked woman stood with her back to him, watching intently as a large Linolean in a zippered mask plundered the gagged pawnbroker from behind. Linus wanted to vomit, but he choked it back, knowing that doing so would alert his captor to his consciousness.

Instead, he set to work stretching to reach his back pocket.

The stupid woman took my cannon, but she didn’t find the knife...

The brutal display carried on across the room like a bad pulp teleshow as Linus sawed through his bonds. He had to work his way through the rope slowly; with the knife awkwardly gripped between three fingers he didn’t want to risk it slipping away. After a few agonizing minutes, the rope fell from his wrists.

The sound of grunting and the pawnbroker’s muffled cries for help were chilling Linus to the bone, but these sounds also helped to conceal his movements as he scooted across the floor to the bottom of the stairs.

He began the ascent, taking each step slowly, wishing that he could run but fearing the woman’s laser-shooter.

When Linus finally reached the top, he heaved in relief and went to work searching for his camera, or any camera. After riffling through the display cases and storage boxes, he hadn’t turned up a single camera. He had, however found a Lightscimitar under the cash drawer. The hefty

metal tube was about as long as Linus's forearm, and when he clicked the power switch a curved blade of pure light sliced through the air from one end. Linus stopped for a moment, considering the weapon, twirling it and making cuts at the shadows.

I need a camera, and that bitch downstairs needs to die.

With a final flourish of the glowing energy blade, Linus entered the stairwell and carefully padded down the steps.

When he reached the basement, the grim pounding was still in full swing. The woman remained as enthralled as before, with her back to the door and her hands on her hips. Linus crept toward her slowly, blade raised and ready.

Suddenly, the leather-masked brute glanced over and spotted him, a foul cry of warning moaning from his zippered mouth.

The next instant was a blur.

The woman turned and Linus threw himself toward her.

He heard the shrill whine of a laser-shooter blast, then another. He swung the Lightsabre down and around. With a roar of frustration and vengeance, he chopped and spun his way across the basement.

When time caught up, the room was quiet and still. Linus was standing in the middle of the basement, out of breath and unable to move his arm. Leather-mask was on the floor, his body cut deeply from shoulder to hip. The pawnbroker fared no better, his guts ripped apart by a stray laser bolt.

The woman's hand was still gripped tightly on her laser-shooter. The rest of her was kneeling on the ground six feet away cradling a smoking stump and sobbing through her snow-slopes mask.

"Get some, you bitch," Linus said through ragged breaths.

He held the energy blade at the ready as he approached her, and then he pulled off her mask.

"you're kidding me."

The woman was still sobbing and staring at her arm, now shorter by the length of a hand. Linus raised his foot and put it against her chest, rolling her onto her back. Her eyes were swollen from crying and the look of horror on her face made her almost unrecognizable.

She looked much prettier at Cape Carnival, even when he had seen her crying over Durag.

"So you're Marla. Why the hell were you after me?"

The woman clenched her eyes and fought for breath. Once she was able to summon her voice, she glared up at Linus with burning eyes.

“Because you ruined everything!” she cried. “You got Strongman arrested! We were supposed to be together, and you messed it all up!”

Linus understood.

Strongman and the woman were having an affair. They must have decided that the only way to take Durag out of the picture was to beat his brains in.

“I didn’t want to,” Linus said. “I just want to go back to Earth. Sorry for your luck.”

Linus flicked the energy blade and the woman’s head cleanly fell away. He tossed the Lightscimitar to the ground and began searching the boxes for his camera.

Epilogue

The sky was gray over the Linograd Launchport. Linus was busy loading the last crate of supplies into his spacecar when his cousin stepped into the hangar.

“you’re really going to do this, huh?” Linochev asked solemnly.

Linus eased the spacecar’s door closed and clicked the latch.

“I have to,” Linus said, looking at the pale horizon.

“You could just stay with me, Linus. You always could have.”

Linus looked at his feet. His new boots still needed breaking in. “Thanks. But there’s nothing for me here.”

Linochev put his hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “There’s a lot less up there.”

Linus looked at his wrist chronometer, one of many items he had liberated along with his camera from the pawn shop in Detroitica. Time was running short and he still had to load his ’car into the rocket for orbital launch.

“Earth is up there.”

Linus didn’t have to look at his cousin to know what he was thinking. Everyone thought he was crazy or a fool. His family might be willing to help him, but they weren’t willing to believe in him.

He didn’t want handouts. He didn’t even want to prove that he had been right all along. He just wanted to see blue skies again. He wanted to lie down with crunchy green carpet under his back.

“I’ve got to get loaded up,” Linus said, turning around to face his cousin.

Linochev forced a smile.

“Good luck, man. I hope you find what you’re looking for. I really do.”

Linus nodded and climbed into his shining red 'car.

“I’ll find it,” Linus said to himself, firing up the motors. “Earth is up there, somewhere. And it’s more beautiful than you’ll ever know.”